

Dear Secretary of State for the Home Department, Minister of State for Border Control & Asylum and Under Secretary of State for Citizenship & Immigration,

Congratulations on your appointments to the Government and thank you for the work you have already done in scrapping the Rwanda Scheme and decommissioning the Bibby Stockholm barge. We welcome these important first steps in creating a more just and humane system of protection in the UK.

We write to you as a coalition of academics, NGOs and activists with lived experience from across the UK who have been involved in the Queer SEREDA research project. The recently launched report: [Forced migration and sexual and gender-based violence in queer communities: UK findings from the SEREDA project](#) concluded that the UK asylum system is not only unfit to meet the needs of LGBTQI+ populations but that it is also actively unsafe for them.

Our research found evidence that homophobic and transphobic abuse is common in the asylum system with respondents reporting incidents of violence from other people in asylum housing, inappropriate sexual advances from Home Office contracted staff and verbal abuse from Home Office interpreters during asylum interviews. There are no effective safeguarding procedures to respond to the specific threats faced by LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum who face the strange paradox of having to remain invisible to keep themselves safe from harm while being told that they must meet a Eurocentric and stereotyped idea of queerness to 'prove' their sexual orientation or gender identity to asylum caseworkers. Meanwhile, the extreme social isolation experienced by this group increases their risk of exploitation, abusive relationships and mental ill health.

This knowledge is not new and is backed up by recent report findings published by four organisations represented in this letter. We write this letter to request your department takes urgent action to address the safety of LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum in the UK. While our research makes several recommendations of how this can be done, we have agreed the following areas most urgently needing attention. These are:

Offer LGBTQI+ housing based on self-identified need

The dangers faced by LGBTQI+ people in mainstream asylum accommodation has been evidenced in multiple recent reports across the four nations of the UK ([England](#), [Northern Ireland](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#)). This research confirms those dangers and highlights the urgent need for the provision of specific LGBTQI+ asylum housing for those who need it. The solution already exists and is being offered in parts of England and Wales by Micro Rainbow, but further provision must be expedited across the UK to ensure that all LGBTQI+ forced migrants can be safely accommodated.

Establish a specially trained team to deal with SOGIESC¹ claims

¹ Sexual orientation, gender identities, gender expression, and sex characteristics

Our research uncovered ignorance about the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ people forced to migrate, punctuated by active incidents of homophobia and transphobia from Home Office staff, interpreters and contractors. We urge the Home Office to establish specially trained, trauma-informed teams (including carefully vetted interpreters) to deal with all SOGIESC asylum claims.

End the policy of immigration detention of LGBTQI+ people

Immigration detention has increased since the Illegal Migration Act was implemented. Immigration detention is extremely harmful for anyone, but LGBTQI+ people in particular face harassment and abuse in immigration detention from both staff and other residents. We request that the government immediately end the practice of detaining LGBTQI+ people and [explore community-based alternatives](#) as a matter of urgency.

Increase access to legal aid

Recent cuts in legal aid have [made it increasingly hard for asylum seekers to get access to good representation](#). This is having a disproportionate impact on those making SOGIESC claims due to the complexities of claiming asylum based on sexual orientation or gender identity and the difficulty in finding experienced solicitors willing to take on these cases.

Grant all asylum seekers the right to work

There is a [clear financial and social case for allowing all people seeking asylum the right to work within six months of arriving in the UK](#). Our research found that inability to work increases the risk of SGBV to LGBTQI+ people who face high levels of social isolation and vulnerability to exploitation and abusive relationships. The right to work provides a means of independence that may be vital to keep people safe.

If the UK is to continue to take pride in its reputation as a country that is safe and welcoming of sexual and gender diversity, immediate action must be taken to stop the harms being perpetrated against LGBTQI+ people in the asylum system. As a coalition with extensive expertise in this area, we would welcome a meeting to discuss our evidence and how these changes could be made.

Signed,

Professor Jenny Philimore, University of Birmingham

Minesh Parekh, Rainbow Migration

Sebastian Rocca, CEO, Micro Rainbow

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