Dear Christina,

**Inquiry into destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland**

Thank you for your letter of 29 March 2017.

I, of course, recognise your point regarding the Scottish Parliament’s competency in relation to the public services needed to respond to the presence of asylum seekers in Scotland, and I welcome the opportunity to engage with you on this.

That said, I am not sure how much help I can be to your present inquiry.

You will probably be familiar with my statutory remit, which is set out in the UK Borders Act 2007. I am empowered to inspect the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency with which the Home Secretary, and anyone acting on her behalf, exercises her functions in relation to asylum, immigration, nationality and customs. While this may include commercial contractors, it does not extend to other government departments or agencies, or local authorities, where they are operating under their own legislation or rules.

Of course, I am interested in how these various bodies are called upon to support Home Office agendas, as seems increasingly to be the case, and particularly in the ‘hand-offs’ between the Home Office to others, and what residual responsibilities the former understands that it retains. Later this year, I am planning an inspection in this area, the focus of which is still to be firmed up, but which could include asylum accommodation contracts, since this was recently identified as a concern by the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee.

In relation specifically to asylum, I am just beginning work on an inspection of asylum casework (the last inspection was published in 2015). This is still at the scoping stage. I will be inviting stakeholders from the asylum and refugee sector to a meeting later this month (provisionally the 24th) to hear about their concerns and priorities. I am aware, for example, of concerns about delays in the availability of asylum support payments but do not have any detailed information at this stage. The invitation will include the Scottish Refugee Council, which has a seat on my Refugee and Asylum Stakeholder Forum.
While I meet Home Office ministers and senior officials periodically, I am not privy to the department’s future plans, nor am I asked for my advice. Whatever knowledge I have of Home Office policies and practices is restricted to those areas that I have inspected, and under the UK Borders Act I am prevented from making my inspection findings public until they have been laid in Parliament by the Home Secretary, so I am unable to comment on reports that have yet to be published.

With these heavy caveats, and not wishing to waste the Committee’s time, I am happy to accept your invitation to give evidence to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee on 20 April 2017. However, I suspect it may be more valuable to me in thinking about the scope of future inspections than to the Committee in its inquiry.

As things stand, I am not able to attend in person, and my staff are Home Office civil servants and not empowered to speak on behalf of the Inspectorate. However, the Committee Clerk has been in contact regarding a video conference link and I will ask my team to confirm that we can make this work at this end on Monday.

Yours

[Signature]

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