

Owners of hostel for asylum seekers concerned over online racial anger

The owners of a West Lothian hotel set to become hostel for asylum seekers have admitted to concern over 'racial anger' already circulating online.

The owners of Bathgate's Cairn Hotel have confirmed that it has closed and been leased to government contractors to house asylum seekers.

The move comes 18 months after it was first mooted that the hotel was to cease trading and become accommodation for around 80 single men from the Middle East and Africa awaiting a decision on asylum applications.

It is understood the decision has prompted significant anger online, with a spokeswoman for the hotel's owners, Hannigan Hotels, describing comments on social media describing them as "racial microaggression online."

And one local councillor admitted residents had contacted him about the move, with concerns over their "personal safety".

While the Home Office have not commented on the situation with the hotel, they stressed earlier this year that the use of hotels to house asylum seekers was "unacceptable" and "temporary".

However another of its former hotels, the Cladhan in Falkirk

is leased to the same contractor – Mack Opco Ltd – and has been housing asylum seekers since November 2021.

A spokeswoman for Hannigan Hotels said: “I cannot speak about who the new guests are, as truthfully I do not know and we do not speak on behalf of any of our tenants.”

She added: “The rumours and furore on social media are extremely concerning to us. The racial microaggression, conspiracy theories and disparaging angry comments shown towards people who have potentially been forcibly displaced and may have fled their homes due to war or other factors is truly disappointing.

“As a country, should we not be promoting equality and care to everyone?”

On staff jobs at the hotel, the spokeswoman said: “Contrary to rumours, I can categorically confirm that every single member of staff in the hotel went through the TUPE process, they were all offered the same or promoted roles within the hotel. Some staff accepted, others have decided to move on.”

Local councillors were informed of the changes two weeks ago. Labour’s long serving Harry Cartmill said: “We were told in no uncertain terms that council (or elected members) have no say in these matters and the deal has been completed.

“I’ve already been contacted by quite a few concerned constituents worried about their personal safety in the wake of this announcement – after relating to them the genesis of this imposition and the fact that as their local councillor I had no say in the decision or indeed no influence in how the situation is managed.

“I’ve said that the local police will be aware when asylum seekers arrive and ultimately I can only hope all remains calm and our community continues to live life as normal.”

For the SNP, Councillor Pauline Stafford said: “The facility will be wholly operated and funded via the UK government Home Office and, as such, West Lothian Council will have no role or say in the day to day running of this facility.

“Scotland has a long and honourable history of welcoming people in need of sanctuary and I believe the community in Bathgate will demonstrate their warmth and kindness to people fleeing war, extreme poverty or persecution.

“I sincerely hope the UK government contractor provides accommodation and support services of a higher standard than what has been recently reported in other parts of the UK as all people deserve to live their lives in safety and dignity.

“I will be alert to any concerns or issues raised regarding the Cairn Hotel.”

The Home Office does not comment on what it terms “operational arrangements.”

When rumours surfaced in May this year a spokesperson for the Home Office told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “The Home Office does not comment on operational arrangements for individual sites used for asylum accommodation.

“The use of hotels is a temporary solution, and we are working hard with local authorities to find appropriate accommodation. We continue to ensure the accommodation provided is safe, secure, leaves no one destitute and is appropriate for an individual’s needs.

“The use of hotels to house asylum seekers is unacceptable – there are currently more than 45,500 asylum seekers in hotels costing the UK taxpayer £5.6 million a day.”

by Stuart Somerville Local Democracy Reporter