

Home Affairs Committee

Committee Office House of Commons London SW1A 0AA
Tel +44 (0)20 7219 2049 Email homeaffcom@parliament.uk
Website www.parliament.uk/homeaffcom

From the Committee Chair

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

1 October 2020

Dear Home Secretary,

Media reports on Government proposals for processing of asylum seekers

I am writing following media reports that the Government is exploring a range of new options relating to the processing of migrants seeking asylum in Britain. These have reportedly included the use of overseas processing facilities, with suggestions that the centres could be located up to 5,000 miles from the UK on Ascension Island, or in Moldova, Morocco or Papua New Guinea.

Further reports suggest the Government is considering processing asylum seekers on disused ferries or decommissioned oil platforms in the North Sea. These proposals raise not only practical and logistical questions but ethical ones too.

You will be aware that the Committee is part way through an inquiry into Channel crossings, migration and asylum-seeking routes through the EU. Yesterday, the Committee heard from Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor, UNHCR Representative to the UK, who told us that the Australian model of processing asylum claims offshore

“... has brought about incredible suffering on people who are guilty of no more than seeking asylum. It has also additionally cost, and continues to cost, an incredible amount of money. It seems to be both extremely inappropriate, in terms of the commitments that the country should have to human rights and to asylum, and an incredibly impractical and expensive way of doing so”.¹

Could you please confirm whether plans for offshore processing of asylum seekers are currently under consideration, and how you respond to these serious concerns raised by the UNHCR?

Could you also provide the Committee with more detail on the consultation process that has been taking place in the Home Office on different options.

Our supplementary questions are as follows:

¹ [Oral evidence](#) Q234

1. What is the full list of options for processing asylum seekers which the Home Office has drawn up since July 2019, and what criteria is the Home Office using to assess these options?
2. How advanced are these proposals for offshore asylum processing centres? Will you share the plans and/or any consultation papers with us for scrutiny?
3. Home Office data² (confirmed by Home Office officials in our evidence sessions) indicates that overall asylum applications in the UK fell in the first six months of 2020 compared to the previous year (10,569 in Q1 2020, compared to 11,532 in Q1 2019 and then 5,789 in Q2 2020 compared to 9,772 in Q2 2019). Given this significant reported drop in applications, what is the requirement for providing offshore locations for asylum seekers?
4. Which Government departments and offices within them have participated in assessment of these plans? Has the Government taken legal advice – including on maritime law, international commitments on asylum and human rights?
5. What discussions has the UK Government had with the governments of Moldova, Morocco, Papua New Guinea and the administration of Ascension Island, or with any other country, with regard to locating UK asylum processing centres in those places?
6. What would be the minimum requirement for health care and wellbeing support for asylum seekers in any offshore centre? What access to medical treatment would be needed, how in practice could it be provided and how much would this cost?
7. What staffing support would be needed for any offshore centre, including security, services and support? Where would staff live?
8. What access to independent legal advice would be provided in offshore centres for asylum seekers?
9. How would the Home Office ensure that independent inspection of any offshore facilities takes place, and what would the frequency of such inspections be?
10. What assessment has the Government made of the costs involved in:
 - a) Building an offshore asylum processing centre;
 - b) Transporting individuals to an off-shore asylum-processing centre;
 - c) Refitting and reusing ferries or oil platforms?

And what cost constraints have been imposed on these considerations?

11. What access does the Home Office believe asylum seekers in any of these locations would need to have to things like communications, exercise and education? Is the Home Office considering restricting people's movements? If so, what would be the legal basis for such restrictions?
12. Given that nearly half of current asylum claims (48,698³) have been pending for 3 years or more how long does the Home Office think it would be acceptable for people to remain in these locations?
13. What lessons have been learned from previous considerations of similar or related proposals, such as the Channel ferry used to house asylum seekers in 1987 and the EU's

² UK Government Statistical dataset [Asylum applications decisions and resettlement](#) 28 August 2020

³ Home Office [UK Visa & Immigration Transparency Data Q2 2020](#) 27 August 2020

consideration of a regional disembarkation mechanism (outlined by UNHCR witnesses to us on Wednesday) ⁴?

14. What contingency plans have been prepared for accommodating and protecting asylum seekers whose claims are refused, while resident in a processing centre? What further contingency plans are in place to address circumstances where other countries refuse to accept the return of an asylum seeker from an offshore processing centre?
15. The Home Secretary told us on 15 July that the Home Office has since lockdown been running “a series of exercises in the water, at sea, involving a range of maritime assets, including military assets, to bolster Border Force and to demonstrate how we can safely pick up boats and therefore transfer them back to France”⁵. Did these exercises include any of the proposals which have been cited in media coverage from 30 Sept – 1 October such as (but not limited to) the Daily Mail report that the Home Office considered putting wave machines in the Channel to stop migrant crossings? If so, which proposals have been tested and with what results?
16. How do these proposals fit with your stated ambition, in response to the Windrush Lessons Learned Review, to “build a fairer, more compassionate, Home Office that puts people first and sees the ‘face behind the case’”?

In view of the urgent public interest in this issue I would be grateful for your response by 9 October.

Yours sincerely



Yvette Cooper MP

⁴ [Oral evidence](#) Q236

⁵ [Oral evidence](#) Q48