



Home Affairs Committee

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Michael Tomlinson KC MP
Home Office
2 Marsham St,
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01 February 2024

Dear Minister,

As you will be aware, the Home Affairs Select Committee recently visited the Bibby Stockholm as part of our inquiry into Migration and Asylum. We were joined on the visit by colleagues from the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

The Home Affairs Committee is writing to you today to share some of our reflections and concerns about the Bibby Stockholm, in the hope that you will take them into account when considering the future of the vessel.

Whilst we are grateful to Home Office officials and staff running the vessel for facilitating our visit, we felt that there were some discrepancies between what they were telling us and what we were told by asylum seekers residing on the vessel.

Asylum-seekers chosen to reside on the barge

During our discussions with some of the asylum seekers residing on Bibby Stockholm, it became clear that many did not understand why they had been chosen to move onto the vessel. Some had also not been given any indication of how long they would remain on the vessel for, resulting in a decline in their mental health. This was extremely concerning to hear.

We are aware that accommodation on the barge was offered to asylum-seekers on a “no-choice basis” and that “any asylum seeker who refuses accommodation may have their government support withdrawn”.¹ According to the Home Office [guidance](#) on allocation of asylum accommodation policy, “vessels are only to be used to accommodate single, adult males between the ages of 18 to 65”, and eligible individuals to be accommodated on the barge arrived in the UK between 28 June 2022 and 7 March 2023. The guidance also notes that the maximum length of stay at a vessel is expected to be 9 months. If this is the case, the Home Office must ensure it regularly communicates with those living on the vessel, keeping them informed and updated on their asylum application, indicating when they are likely to have a decision made and how long they are likely to remain on the vessel. If some asylum



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seekers are chosen to reside on the vessel whilst waiting for an initial decision to be made, the Home Office should indicate the reason for this decision. Given this, we ask:

- 1. How does the Home Office decide, amongst those who fit the suitability criteria to be accommodated at the Bibby Stockholm, which asylum seekers will be accommodated there?**
- 2. To what extent does the Home Office monitor whether asylum seekers placed on the Bibby Stockholm remain suitable to live on the barge?**
- 3. To what extent are residents informed and updated on their asylum application, and made aware of how long they are likely to remain on the vessel for?**

Living conditions

We were disheartened to see some of the living conditions on the Bibby Stockholm, with many individuals having to share small, cramped cabins (originally designed for one person), often with people (up to 6) they do not know (some of whom spoke a different language to them). These crowded conditions were clearly contributing to a decline in mental health for some of the residents, and they could amount to violations of the human rights of asylum seekers.

This observation was also raised as a concern in a [letter](#) sent to us by Inquest, who argued that these conditions are “associated with a range of negative health consequences, including anxiety, depression and psychological distress”. Inquest also raised concerns over the risk of respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19 and tuberculosis. We are aware of the recent outbreak of legionella on the Bibby Stockholm, which supports Inquest’s concerns.

- 4. Is the Home Office confident that living conditions on the barge are suitable for asylum seekers, and do not violate the human rights of individuals living there?**
- 5. Can you confirm whether the Home Office is meeting its legal obligations in terms of the numbers of people residing in each of the cabins?**

Isolation

We were told about a variety of activities being made available to asylum seekers on the Bibby Stockholm, including English language lessons, maths lessons and a range of sporting activities. However, many asylum seekers told us that they still feel isolated, and that they have restricted access to the local communities in Portland



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and other surrounding areas. Whilst we were told that a regular bus service operates from the barge to the local areas, enabling asylum-seekers on board to travel to see any relations they have in the UK, it is clear that many are unlikely to be able to afford travel beyond those local areas.

Some also noted that access to religious services for Muslims are very limited. Although asylum seekers are not formally detained on the barge, there are strict rules requiring residents to regularly inform staff about their whereabouts. Organisations that work with asylum seekers have [said](#) that “for those on board, the Bibby Stockholm feels like a prison”. We heard similar stories from asylum seekers who shared their experiences with us during the visit.

6. What support (financial or otherwise) is given to asylum seekers wishing to leave the barge to visit family and friends who may live outside of Weymouth? What are the rules for asylum seekers who wish to leave the barge for long and short periods of time, for example to visit friends or to attend religious services?

7. What is the procedure when the whereabouts of an asylum seeker that should be on the barge are not known? What are the consequences for such an asylum seeker if their whereabouts remain unknown?

8. What is being done to facilitate the connection of asylum seekers to the local communities in Portland and other surrounding areas?

Medical facilities and services

Access to onsite GP

Information given to us regarding the medical facilities on the Bibby Stockholm was inconsistent. At one point we were told that asylum seekers had daily access to an onsite GP (between Monday-Friday) and that they were often able to be seen straight away. However, at another point, it emerged that a GP had to contractually be onsite only one day per week between 9-5pm and that some asylum-seekers struggled to access a GP.

Screening

An asylum seeker told a member of the delegation that the screening process asylum seekers should go through, to detect health conditions before they arrive on the vessel, was not always taking place. They argued that this was having a significant impact on the health of some of those on the residing on the vessel.

Mental health support

We were told that there was limited access to mental health support, at a time when many of them were struggling with their mental health. This issue was also raised by Inquest in its letter to the Committee, which argued that more safeguards are needed



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to prevent vulnerable residents being placed on the barge where the living conditions are contributing to a deterioration in mental health.

Given the recent and tragic suicide of an individual residing on the barge, we would hope that the Home Office is taking all suitable steps to ensure mental health support is available to all those residing there, including access to mental health services that can act immediately when a report is made.

It is concerning that, in our short visit, many asylum seekers expressed mental health concerns. It was alarming that one asylum seeker told a member of the delegation that they had had thoughts of suicide as a result of having to reside on the barge. Although we were assured that the relevant safeguarding team would work with this particular individual, we are extremely concerned about the apparent lack of mental health support for those on the barge.

We would therefore appreciate clarity on:

9. Can the Home Office confirm that all those residing on the vessel have been screened in order to identify any health issues?

10. What mental health support is available to those currently residing on the Bibby Stockholm?

11. What has been done to improve access to mental health services since the recent suicide?

12. What safeguards are in place for those who are self-harming on the vessel?

13. How often is a GP required to be onsite at the Bibby Stockholm and their working hours?

Right to work

We understand that only asylum seekers whose claims have been outstanding for more than 12 months, through no fault of their own, can request permission to work in the UK. However, under this policy, those who are allowed to work are restricted to jobs on the shortage occupation list. Further, we do not have current data showing the number of asylum seekers within this category that have been granted the right to work. Given the shortage of workers in the labour market and the fact that many on the barge are likely to fit the criteria for applying for a right to work, greater consideration should be given to the merits of enabling those residing on the Bibby Stockholm (who have been in the UK for 12 months or more), to work.

14. How many asylum seekers in the UK have had their asylum claims outstanding for more than 12 months through no fault of their own?



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How many have applied for, and how many have been granted the right to work?

15. Are all of those who fit the criteria above granted a right to work? If not, why?

Engagement and consultation with the local community

We welcomed the discussion with the Multi Agency Forum about the efforts being made to support the operational planning of the Bibby Stockholm. However, we were concerned to learn of the impact the Bibby Stockholm has had the local community and Dorset Council, due to the lack of consultation and engagement with local communities in Portland and other surrounding areas.

Members of the local community understandably had questions and concerns about the vessel being placed in Portland, but Dorset Council told us that they had not been given enough information to satisfactorily respond to those queries. This has resulted in a breakdown of trust between the local community and the Council. We were told that engagement and consultation with the local community should have taken place prior to the vessel being placed in Portland, to reassure those in the local area. A desire for the Home Office to have taken more time to research and understand the needs of the local community had also been expressed.

Whilst we understand Dorset Council is receiving £3,500 per occupied bedspace, consultation and engagement with the local community before a decision to base the vessel in Portland, should have taken place. This would have enabled the Dorset Council to be as transparent as possible with the local community and maintained trust between both.

Should the Home Office decide to continue operation of the Bibby Stockholm after the 18 months has passed, or decide to place a similar vessel in another part of the UK, we would urge that consultation with the local community takes place.

16. To what extent did the Home Office engage with, and consult, local communities in Portland and surrounding areas before the placement of the barge in Portland?

17. What is being done to ensure that local communities are represented, and local concerns are considered whilst the Bibby Stockholm is in Portland?

18. Does the Home Office commit to consult with local communities if it wishes to extend the operation of Bibby Stockholm in Portland?

We hope our reflections will be considered when the Home Office considers the future of the Bibby Stockholm, and any similar vessels it may consider for the



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purpose of housing asylum seekers. We would be grateful for a response by 16 February 2024.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diana Johnson".

Dame Diana Johnson MP

Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee