

Home Affairs Committee

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From the Committee Chair

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

18 February 2021

Dear Home Secretary,

The Committee took evidence on 3 February to update its inquiry on *Home Office preparedness for Covid-19*, in respect of institutional accommodation.

The Committee heard deeply concerning evidence about the repurposing of the former military barracks at Napier and Penally as contingency asylum accommodation, about the public health implications during the pandemic and about conditions for asylum seekers at those sites. While the Home Office has repeatedly stated that this accommodation is fully compliant with relevant guidelines, most recently at oral questions on 8 February¹, we heard that the scale of the recent outbreak of Covid-19 at Napier barracks makes plain that these sites are not safe during the pandemic. We were told of concerns at both sites about the use of shared dormitories, bathroom and dining facilities, poorly ventilated rooms, restricted mealtimes, and inadequate facilities for self-isolation. These collectively present risks not just to the asylum seekers themselves but also to staff and to the wider community.²

(1) Reviews and assessments

Witnesses have drawn to our attention that the Home Office commissioned a ‘rapid review’ of initial accommodation including barracks sites, to “provide assurance of compliance with public health guidelines to prevent the transmission of Covid-19”, which was due to report by the end of November 2020. Your department stated in November and again in January that it would “seek to publish a summary of the recommendations”³ but has not yet done so. Nor has it published its equality impact assessment into the policy of using MOD sites to accommodate asylum seekers, or the health assessment carried out by the local clinical commissioning group to inform the management of Covid outbreaks in the former military barracks. Please can you provide us with each of these documents.

¹ [Hansard](#) 8 February 2021 col 10

² [Oral evidence](#) 3 February 2021 QQ938, 939, 942

³ [PQ UIN 110852 \[Asylum: hotels and military bases\] answered 12 November 2020; PQ UIN 139062 \[Asylum: housing\] answered 21 January 2021](#)

Additionally, please can you provide us with the full rapid review which underpins the recommendations and, in particular, the full public health assessment of dormitory and shared bathroom accommodation: this should include the public health assessment undertaken on the decision to accommodate up to 28 people in the same room.

Please can you also clarify who conducted those public health assessments, and whether these individuals were Home Office officials, independent medical experts or local public health officials.

In this context we would also draw to your attention that during evidence with the Permanent and Second Permanent Secretary last July Stuart McDonald MP requested that the Committee be provided with copy of plans relating to the movement of asylum seekers in Glasgow from flats into hotels during the first lockdown. The Permanent Secretary's written response referred to contingency accommodation and exit and recovery plans but did not provide any of those documents.⁴ These are still of interest to the Committee: please provide them to the Committee now.

The Guardian reported on 16 February that the Home Office will meet public health officials today (18 February) to discuss management of future Covid outbreaks at Napier barracks.⁵ Please provide us with information on the revised Covid management plan for Napier barracks by Monday 8 March.

(ii) The public health implications of dormitory accommodation

Serious concerns have been raised with us about the implications of the accommodation arrangements for public health during the pandemic, and in particular the shared sleeping, bathroom and dining arrangements. Can you tell us how many people are currently sleeping in dormitories or sharing rooms with unrelated adults at Napier and Penally?

We were also informed that some residents with positive Covid tests continued to sleep in dormitory accommodation with others who had not had positive tests. Can you tell us if that happened?

(iii) Conditions at Napier after 29 January

During evidence we also heard specific concerns about conditions in Napier following the fire on 29 January including disruption to electricity and heating, and interruption to the supply of safe drinking water. We heard that some staff were not in attendance following the fire, including both the on-site nurse and office staff who would receive and pass on residents' Covid-19 test results.⁶

Requirements for safe water, medical care and, in the winter, light and heat are fundamental. Can you tell us for how long drinking water supplies and heating were affected? Please confirm to us the steps you have taken to address both the Covid outbreak and the recent deterioration in conditions at this site and advise when these services were restored.

(iv) Harassment of asylum seekers

Please confirm to us also the steps you are taking to monitor and address the intimidation and harassment of asylum seekers by protestors outside former military sites. This information may be provided privately, if more appropriate.

(v) Impact of former military accommodation on traumatised individuals

Senior medical professionals including the chair of the BMA medical ethics committee and the chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists have written to advise you that former military accommodation

⁴ [Oral evidence](#), Q22-27; [letter](#) from the Permanent Secretary, 2 September 2020

⁵ [Home Office were advised not to house asylum seekers in Napier barracks](#), 16 February 2021

⁶ [Oral evidence](#) 3 February 2021 QQ943, 945, 951

is highly inappropriate for survivors of captivity, human trafficking, or torture and we have heard and received troubling reports of individuals experiencing rapidly deteriorating mental health and self-harming, and some reports of attempted suicide.

In light of your department's recent that it will not pursue plans to open a further site adjacent to Yarl's Wood IRC please advise us what plans the Department has made, or is considering, for the closure of all asylum accommodation on former MoD sites.

With the exception of information specifically requested by Monday 8 March, please provide the information requested in this letter by 22 February.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yvette Cooper', written in a cursive style.

Yvette Cooper MP