

Emma Haddad
Director General
Asylum and Protection
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London



21 March 2021

Dear Emma,

**An inspection of contingency asylum accommodation:
HMIP report on Penally Camp and Napier Barracks**

Please find attached HMIP's report on Penally Camp and Napier Barracks. HMIP has provided this to me on the understanding that it will be appended to ICIBI's inspection report when the contingency asylum accommodation inspection is completed. HMIP is mindful that it was acting in support of ICIBI and will not publish it separately ahead of this.

The report is self-explanatory. From my visits to both camps, I believe that it is both accurate and fair. I am forwarding it to you now as it raises a number of important learning points that are relevant not only to the Home Office's immediate plans for Napier Barracks but also to any considerations that are being given to alternative forms of asylum accommodation going forward.

Over the past few months, I have been in dialogue with residents and former residents of both camps and with some of the third sector organisations that have been supporting them. More recently, I have spoken with stakeholders in Wales and Kent, as well as some from other areas. This has raised many issues, but there are four that I would like to draw out here.

Firstly, the failure to consult local stakeholders on whose services and support the camps would be reliant before taking the decision to proceed was a serious mistake and the need to move at speed is not a satisfactory excuse. The fact that in both cases local stakeholders learned of the decision via rumours rather than from the Home Office made matters worse. Professional courtesies aside, it is hard to see how the Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes were able to make an accurate assessment of the risks and suitability of either site without input from these stakeholders. Was it known, for example, that two of the four GP practices in Folkestone had recently closed?

There are clear lessons here about early engagement if any new locations are being considered, particularly if these are remote, or are not existing dispersal areas, or where large concentrations of asylum seekers are involved.

Secondly, from my discussions with medical professionals and those providing health services, as well as with residents and former residents of both camps, it was evident that whatever assessments had been made of the physical and mental health of the men selected as suitable to be moved to Penally and Napier, they were wholly inadequate. In fact, only a tiny percentage arrived at Penally with a health assessment. At both camps, a

number of men were identified as suffering from serious underlying physical and mental health conditions, including one case of active TB at Napier.

This is really a question about whether more needs to be done when the Home Office first encounters an asylum seeker to establish their health and welfare needs, both to ensure appropriate professional care and to safeguard against any public health risks (not merely COVID-19 but other communicable or blood-borne diseases, particularly where the person may have been living rough for a prolonged period). This would require a medical examination and tests rather than the current self-declaration through the screening interview.

I mentioned this briefly in my valedictory meeting on 18 March with the Minister for Future Borders and Minister for Immigration Compliance and Justice. We agreed that there would be significant legal and handling issues regarding consent. Nonetheless, I believe that the Home Office should explore this further, particularly given the government's intention to overhaul the asylum system.

Continuity of health care was raised with me by several stakeholders. This is obviously made more difficult if service users are being moved around the asylum accommodation estate. From this perspective, it may therefore have benefited some Penally and Napier residents that they were obliged to stay there for longer than the "few weeks" that was originally envisaged. To be clear, this is not an argument in favour of Penally or Napier over other forms of asylum accommodation but is about providing asylum seekers with some stability.

Thirdly, communication with the men in both camps has been extremely poorly managed and has been at the heart of many problems, including the fire at Napier, but more generally the levels of stress and anxiety felt by everyone. I accept that COVID-19 made it much more difficult to say how long anyone would be required to stay in either camp, but the lack of notice and information when men were being moved into and out of Penally and Napier suggested that they were very much seen as "cases" not "faces".

This raises questions about the management of asylum accommodation provision, and also about the role played by Migrant Help, which go wider than Penally and Napier. While I am not arguing against these functions having been outsourced, I believe that the Home Office has been too 'hands-off' in the case of the camps and should have had a regular presence at both, as I mentioned to the Permanent Secretary back in January.

But, it also raises questions about the asylum process itself. You will already know that what asylum seekers want to know more than anything is what is happening with their claim. Few understand that they should not expect to hear anything from the Home Office for months, until called forward for their substantive interview. Penally and Napier residents were/are no different, except for a feeling that their claims had been marked out as in some way inferior.

I am aware that one of the aims of the planned overhaul of the asylum system is to speed up the process. Regardless, the volumes and the current backlog mean that some claimants will be waiting many months for a substantive interview and decision. It would therefore be sensible to consider whether to build periodic updates on the progress of individual claims into any new system.

Finally, there are two matters regarding actions by the sub-contractor at Napier about which I wanted to be sure that you were aware.

The first concerns poor employment practices. When the ICIBI/HMIP team visited Napier on 17-18 February they found that some employees were living onsite in squalid and unsafe accommodation and were seemingly working in breach of their student visa conditions. When I visited on 4 March, I was told that these individuals were no longer working for the sub-contractor as they were not willing to reduce their hours. I was also told that the accommodation they had been using was no longer in use and locked.

The second concerns the use by the sub-contractors of Gmail to share personal information, including service users' dates of birth, CID references and details of safeguarding concerns. Inspectors were concerned that this constituted a data breach and, as such, should be reported by the department to the Information Commissioner.

You will obviously want to satisfy yourself regarding the facts. ICIBI will be interested in the outcome of your investigations, and in knowing what actions have been taken.

As you know, my term as Independent Chief Inspector ends on 21 March 2021. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for the help you have provided with this inspection and to wish you luck with one of the most challenging areas of the department's borders and immigration business.

I am sure that David Neal may wish to pick up some of these points with you in due course. Meanwhile, [name] [REDACTED] is now leading the contingency asylum accommodation inspection, which is beginning to look beyond Penally and Napier to the use of hotels.

I am copying this letter to the Home Secretary, Minister for Future Borders, Minister for Immigration Compliance and Justice, the Permanent Secretary, and to HMIP.

Yours sincerely,

David Bolt
Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration