

Home Affairs Committee
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From the Committee Chair

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
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28 July 2021

Dear Home Secretary,

Home Affairs Committee visit to the Kent Intake Unit

I am writing to raise serious concerns about the shocking conditions the Committee observed during its visit to the Kent Intake Unit yesterday.

The holding room facility, in which detained asylum seekers wait for onward placement and screening, is wholly inappropriate. Yesterday there were 56 people packed into the small waiting room. The space is clearly unfit for holding this many people. Most people were sitting or lying on a thin mattress and those covered almost the entirety of the floor including the aisles between seats. Sharing these cramped conditions were many women with babies and very young children alongside significant numbers of teenage and young adult men. We heard that the maximum period of time any individual should be held in this room is 24 hours but that in recent weeks some people have been kept in this small holding room for periods up to 36 and 48 hours.

In addition to overcrowding and the length of stays, the Committee was very concerned about the clear risk of a Covid-19 outbreak. Adult asylum seekers must take a lateral flow test and receive a negative result before entering the Kent Intake Unit. However, it is well known that lateral flow tests are not 100% accurate and will not pick up all cases that develop over the subsequent 48 hours. The holding room, in which some people are waiting for up to 48 hours, has no ventilation, no social distancing and face masks are not worn. We assume that most people are not vaccinated. Given how closely people are packed together we have grave concerns

about how easy it would be if only one staff member or asylum seeker had Covid-19 to spread rapidly to everyone in the room. The Committee did not observe any Covid-19 mitigation measures and, with the current levels of overcrowding, could not see how the facility could be Covid safe.

The Committee also visited the atrium facility, where people wait when they are no longer in detention and awaiting onward travel. The atrium is essentially an office space with a large central room and several adjoining offices. We heard that since Kent County Council stopped accepting unaccompanied child migrants on 14 June 2021, there have been 5 stays of over 200 hours (10 days) in this office space and increasing numbers of multiple-day stays. The Permanent Secretary has now confirmed in correspondence to the Committee that one of the individuals held in this office space for over 10 days was an unaccompanied child. One girl was sleeping on a sofa in an office, as the only available separate sleeping accommodation. For children, this kind of accommodation for days on end is completely inappropriate.

The Kent Intake Unit is not a residential facility. It is a facility designed to provide initial screening and registering of service users, over a number of hours, before they move to more permanent accommodation. It is extremely troubling that a situation has been allowed to arise, and persist, where vulnerable children, families and young people are being held in this manifestly inappropriate office space for days and even weeks.

These issues have been raised previously with the Home Office. In September 2020 the Chief Inspector of prisons visited the Kent Intake Unit¹ and found conditions unacceptable and very similar to those which we encountered yesterday. The Chief Inspector recommended that contingency planning should ensure there would be an effective response to fluctuating numbers of arrivals at Tug Haven, Kent Intake Unit and Frontier House; that people should only be held overnight in exceptional circumstances; and that the Home Office should ensure that its practices comply with its “*duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children arriving in the UK*”. We saw no sign that any of these recommendations had been taken up at the KIU nearly a year after they were made.

Please clarify urgently:

- What Covid-19 risk assessment has been completed on the holding facilities at the Kent Intake Unit and Frontier House, and what public health advice has been sought on keeping people in crowded rooms without ventilation for several days? Please can you send us a copy of that risk assessment?
- If the current Covid-19 risk assessments are modelled on small numbers of service users staying no longer than 8 hours, what assessment Public Health England has made of the Covid-19 risk of holding individuals for up to 48 hours, in high numbers, in the holding facilities of both the Kent Intake Unit and Frontier House?

¹ HM Chief Inspector of prisons [Report on an unannounced inspection of the detention of migrants arriving in Dover in small boats](#) 2-4 and 7-10 September 2020

- What contingency planning has taken place since September 2020 to ensure there is appropriate safe capacity for fluctuating numbers of arrivals in line with the Inspectorate report?
- The Home Office's expectation regarding the additional capacity which will be available to accommodate unaccompanied minors in the next 14 days following the 'soft launch' of the new National Transfer Scheme on 26 July?
- Whether the Home Office will now set mandatory limits on the number of occupants and length of stay for service users in the Kent Intake Unit and Frontier House, beyond which other accommodation or facilities must be provided?

I would appreciate a response by Tuesday 3rd August 2021.

Yours sincerely

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

Yvette Cooper MP