

To: David Bolt, Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration chiefinspector@icibi.gov.uk.

Call for evidence: An inspection of the use of hotels and barracks as contingency asylum accommodation

The Home Office emphasis on find and remove, and increasing the tensions of an already hostile environment demonstrate a clear lack of willingness to find a humanitarian way forward in these exceptional circumstances.

The bottom line is that the Home Office has, at best and being very generous, allowed the conditions described to prevail by their lack of care, but it seems that there is a deliberate policy to promote and continue the hostile environment, whilst paying substantial sums to the private sector.

*There are strong moral, political, practical, and financial arguments to support the campaign for *Indefinite Leave to Remain/settled status for all who are undocumented or in the legal process.*

~*~

I have a number of 'hats' and this submission is written in a personal capacity.

The quotes in boxes are lifted from Quaker texts – I am a Quaker and a member of the Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network - QARN, but not a Christian, however these quotes highlight a way of thinking that is important to me.

How successive British governments have hardened their hearts and closed doors to asylum-seekers: *'That which is morally wrong cannot be politically right.'*

Quakers Yearly Meeting in 1822 – from Quaker Faith and Practice no. 23.26

Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network - QARN: In 2006 concerned Quakers set up the Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network - QARN <http://qarn.org.uk> so that we could work together on joint advocacy and campaign for radical change to the asylum system, and to change the way that refugees and asylum seekers (whether recognised under the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees or not) are treated, to ensure that justice and compassion are the guiding principles.

Why are Quakers concerned?

Many of our politicians and our fellow-citizens appear to have no understanding of the commandment to do justice and love mercy. They have hardened their hearts against all who come to our shores looking for help. But nothing is inevitable; as we are reminded by George Fox, we must be of good faith and valiant for the Truth in this thick night of darkness.

QARN is now a nationwide network of 140+ Quakers, who are active in supporting asylum seekers and advocating for their rights. They have first-hand knowledge of the challenges experienced by new arrivals.

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International Quaker statement on migration

For International Migrants Day, December 2020, Quaker organisations across Europe and America developed an international Quaker statement on migration.

The core of the statement says: *“Rooted in our belief that there is that of the sacred in everyone, our spiritual leading to uphold the inherent value and agency of every human being, and our commitment to building a world without violence, we are heartbroken by migration policy that dehumanises some members of our human family on the basis of where they come from. We reject the notion that security for some can be achieved through means that use or result in violence and insecurity for others. We abhor the many forms of violence used in the management of migration and the effect current migration systems have in dividing our human family.”*

QARN is a signatory to the StatusNow4All campaign, <http://statusnow4all.org> which presents a simple solution to the current situation – the granting of *Indefinite Leave to Remain:

*We call upon the British and Irish States to act immediately so that all undocumented, destitute and migrant people in the legal process in both the UK and Ireland are granted Status Now, as in *Leave to Remain. In this way every human, irrespective of their nationality or citizenship can access healthcare, housing, food and the same sources of income from the State as everyone else.*

<http://statusnow4all.org>

In respect of the current situation regarding the use of ‘contingency units’ by the Home Office, I have had contact with other Quakers, and organisations directly involved with supporting men at Napier and Penally camps; also conversations on Zoom with people who have been living in the Penally and Napier camps which are denoted by bullet points in the text below.

Summary:

This submission has been collated from information gathered from close contact with people seeking asylum, and specifically the ‘contingency units’ in a number of ways. Included are anonymised accounts taken from people I have spoken to, who have lived experience of being accommodated in these units, some of whom are too worried to speak for themselves because they have been led to believe by accommodation provider staff that this will lead to their asylum claim being refused.

Despite previous recommendations of the ICIBI and the Home Affairs Committee, the institutions providing accommodation for people in this hostile asylum system continue to treat their residents like units, to be moved around with little respect for the person’s physical or mental health or support systems, their need to have some predictability in their lives, perhaps deliberately, which all adds to the psychological burden this particular group of people have already experienced.

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The Home Office has failed in its duty of care for people in the asylum system, whilst recognising that the officers work within an institutional hostile environment that has been created over a number of years that has allowed oppressive practices to become the norm.

Priti Patel as the Secretary of State for the Home Department and her officers at the top of the tree right down to those at the bottom of the management structure in sub-contracted organisations, through the AASC and AIRE contracts, are accountable for this.

In respect of questions posed by the inspector:

Communication between the Home Office and the accommodation service providers, and with other stakeholders (for example, local authorities, health services, NGOs who provide support to asylum seekers), regarding the need for contingency asylum accommodation in particular areas

Communications between AASC provider Serco, and local services:

G4S, and then Serco staff who took on the AASC contract in 2019 have made it known for over three years at multi-agency meetings – MAF that they would appreciate help to source additional accommodation sites in new geographical areas due to increasing demand. The local MAF began when G4S as it was then took over a decommissioned building used for multi-occupation as dispersal accommodation four miles away from the support services which were concentrated in the city. This was apparently a new departure for Serco to the usual dispersal accommodation, and this new venture was due to increasing demands on their services. The MAF was informed that there would be no new units in this area as we have the 56-bed unit already.

Talk of ‘contingency units’ pre-dates the Covid-19 pandemic. It is recorded in January 2020 that Serco staff were using this phrase in meetings, and asking for help to find more ‘units’. They were willing to consider b&b, hostels and hotels, and possibly converting office blocks or any other suggestions to meet the need. The local Strategic Migration Partnership was also clearly aware of this situation.

The process(es) for identifying potential contingency asylum accommodation and for testing and deciding about the suitability of specific sites, including with regard to Covid-19 safety

The decision to use army camps and hotels is of significant concern, especially as some people are likely to float around in this system for months. Other ideas that have been floated are also of great concern such as erecting pre-fabs in Yarls Wood or elsewhere with communal areas under canvass; the use of old ferries; removing people to Ascension Island.

Priti Patel speaks of the barracks as suitable for soldiers, but this does not take account of the fact that people seeking asylum are not there voluntarily, and as many will have

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suffered significant distress prior to making their journey, and on route their psychological needs are very different to volunteer soldiers. The Guardian has reported on 15.2.2021 that Napier barracks was in any event deemed unsuitable as a place for people to stay many years ago. I have not seen any assessment by the Home Office that takes into account assessments of the health and psychological needs of the men being sent there, or of the suitability of the buildings as a longer-term place of residence.

- I understand from people who have been sent to the camps that there was no assessment carried out to their knowledge, other than on first arrival when they may not have fully understood the situation or the language (or interpreter).

I have heard from a number of sources that people who have sought refuge in UK are suffering a traumatic reaction in this Covid-19 situation – panic, flashbacks etc. – through being exposed to such levels of uncertainty, fear stalking the streets, having to avoid contact with family and friends for example, and their mental health has deteriorated during the time of this crisis. An initial assessment of someone’s mental and physical health cannot be relied on when deciding their suitability to be exposed to the camp environment under these conditions, and also, some experience flashbacks of previous trauma after they arrive due to the chain link fencing, barbed wire and hostile activity from the far right, and/or other experiences since arriving in UK.

- In relation to social distancing, people who have been living in the camps describe sharing sleeping areas with many other people, having to use communal showers, sharing toilets with many others, eating in a large area which everyone is expected to use, one communal room for socialising for everyone where the internet signal could be found and the (two) TVs were kept.
- Those who were in Covid isolation still shared the washing areas with others, there was no real separation.

In hotels: people were also using communal facilities, and due to the lack of clear information there was fear about whether or not Covid was present in the hotel.

Suitability of using hotels and camps in relation to action taken (or not) to prevent on-going hostile attacks by the far right:

The hotels and camps have been used by far right ‘activists’ in an attempt to intimidate people in the asylum system, and further their racist messages and feed the hostile environment, and the people living in these facilities have not been properly protected. It seems to have begun in August 2020, when Britain First uploaded videos of themselves marching into a hotel near Coventry, banging on doors of residents there, assertively asking them questions and guessing their country of origin, seemingly unhindered. They have been able to film many of these such invasions prior to the country-wide Covid-19 lockdown, for example in *Essex, London, Newcastle, Bromsgrove, Warrington, amongst other sites*, and I understand they have had a presence on the service road at Napier barracks.

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The videos made and shown on social media invaded people's privacy, and potentially put some individuals at risk as the film identified their location, opening them up to abuse from the local community and other far right supporters, but also to being found by their adversaries from whom they had fled.

- Those accommodated in the camps at Penally and Napier report that prior to Covid-19 lockdown hostile people from the far right – Britain First for example - were coming to the perimeter fencing, or hanging around outside the gates, that they would call them over to engage them in conversation. Many people in the asylum system have no idea about the political situation in UK and were taken unawares by this, and were aghast to see themselves on social media.
- Men at Napier barracks report being especially afraid at night when they heard the fencing being rattled, fireworks exploding and the men outside calling them, and they tried to avoid leaving their building to go to the toilet block or visit friends.
- They said the far right took it in shifts to harass them so that the tension was kept at a high level all day, and those with the most threatening attitudes came at night when it was dark. They did not feel protected in these circumstances by the Police or the accommodation provider.
- It has been difficult to work out who in the system would take responsibility to defend the people in hotels and camps from the invasion of privacy and to stop this pattern of behaviour which has clearly caused great distress. The residents are in no position to make formal complaints to the Police, and are powerless in the face of this unexpected (as far as they are concerned) assault happening in the democratic UK.
- People in Napier camp spoke of the expectation that UK would be welcoming, and to find themselves as the subject of far-right activity was devastating. The verbal and intimidating assaults have been allowed to continue.

I refer the reader back to the impact such a situation may have in invoking a traumatic reaction.

In relation to who would take responsibility for stopping this Britain First (and others) activity:

The Home Office representative was clear that he expected the AASC providers to step up security as necessary, to work with Police, and for people considered to be 'vulnerable' to be referred to the Home Office by the Red Cross for specialist support - there is no indication of who would make that assessment or what constitutes 'vulnerable' where everyone is at psychological risk of harm – and for the people seeking asylum to be referred to the AIRE service, Migrant Help, for support.

Why are such actions not dealt with swiftly?

'Evils which have struck their roots deep in the fabric of human society are often accepted ... as part of the providential ordering of life. They lurk unsuspected in the system of things ...' William Charles Braithwaite, 1919, Quaker Faith and Practice 23.05

I asked what legal framework would be used to have the videos removed from social media, and to stop the hostile approaches as the residents were not in a position to do this

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themselves. I was eventually informed by the Home Office that action had been taken to have the videos removed from social media. It does not appear to have happened. There are videos still uploaded to the Britain First website, from August to December 2020, the main link to their videos being here: <https://www.bitchute.com/channel/6toZyV9Etx26/>

Advice given:

The AASC provider Serco advised contacting the Police or hotel staff regarding taking legal proceedings about the videos taken in hotels under their contracts, and to contact Migrant Help under AIRE scheme for mental health support if people felt they needed it. They advised that they would involve the Police but would not make official complaints to the Police that would lead to legal action in this situation. They suggest that security lies with the hotel owners and/or the Police.

Migrant Help responded: 'While the management of the accommodation locations lies with the AASC providers, and ultimately the Home Office, we are keen to work in partnership with them to address these issues.' We know that calls to Migrant Help can take up to one hour at times.

The Police are organised within the Home Office, and so I asked what action or legal remedy will the Home Office take on this issue. I did not receive an answer to this

It just goes round in circles. In this whole picture, no-one was taking responsibility for taking down the videos, and to stop the Britain First hostile actions.

The Home Office hired a private risk management company, Human Applications (<https://ergonomics.org.uk/humanapplications>) to provide a 'rapid review of initial accommodation for single adult asylum seekers, including hotels and former military barracks, and provide assurance of compliance with public health guidelines to prevent the transmission of Covid 19.' This was quickly arranged, and the process did not allow for proper engagement of NGOs with knowledge of the situation; also the Home Office has stated that it does not intend to make this report public.

Decisions about individual asylum seekers and their needs in terms of accommodation and other support, including information sharing, record keeping, oversight and review, particularly with regard to vulnerabilities and risks

When unaccompanied asylum-seeking children with no knowledge of English language, and whose age has been disputed are placed in hotels where there is little oversight and support, bearing in mind that there is the potential for the age assessment to be challenged, it seems very risky and inappropriate.

Assessment of people with physical and mental health problems: in relation to the situation with the far-right intrusions in hotels, the Home Office were relying on Red Cross to identify vulnerable people, the AASC providers were relying on Migrant Help to provide support, and in the meantime, in hotels NHS nursing staff are available but mostly by phone, and in the camps the nurse was able to give out paracetamol but little else, often with no privacy

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as they would be hearing people's medical complaints through another resident acting as an interpreter.

In these circumstances who had mental health oversight, and how would someone with a mental health issue be identified?

In the camps, isolated due to their location, with residents at Napier forbidden to leave due to Covid, who would assess someone as vulnerable before they have a proper breakdown or attempt suicide as has happened, if there is no-one on site with the expertise to do this?

- Those in Napier and Penally camp describe a palpable tension and frustration caused by the situation, and spoke with compassion about accepting that some people in the camp would frequently become very angry, and break windows etc which was frightening to experience; they said they would stay out of their shared rooms during the day because a sensitive person may need some space to themselves; there is TV footage of a man trying to breach the fencing of Napier during the Covid lockdown period to escape; the fire at Napier is another indication of the pent-up frustrations building in the camp.
- Residents report that access to appropriate medical services is limited, that there is not local GP service with space for them to register, and then when they are moved they need to find someone all over again. They said that the dentist seemed to be pulling out teeth rather than treating the problem. How can that be acceptable?

If there was on-going assessment of the impact on residents of living in these conditions, these things would not be happening.

- People have reported that they were told their asylum case would be rejected if they complained about the situation in the camps, at the time of the impending Inspection.
- They were told that after days of being locked down due to the high number of Covid cases, they would be able to mingle with others in the camp at midnight as the virus was over, however they had not themselves been tested. When midnight came and they were looking forward to seeing friends this was suddenly locked down again. It caused intense disappointment.
- They do not believe what the staff tell them.
- The fire was started after the residents received a letter from staff at the camp telling them they were to be locked into the camp under Covid rules. When trouble erupted, staff apparently came out to film the fracas. Where was the understanding, the techniques to deflate the tension, compassion?
- It was thought by at least one resident that the staff had no idea who was actually involved in starting the fire, but they told the police which residents they considered to be likely 'suspects', as they had been 'trouble-makers' before.
- Residents understood that once all the residents had negative Covid tests, plus an extra ten days, they would be allowed out again. How long would that take?

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Communication between the Home Office and/or the accommodation service providers and individuals (“service users”) regarding their asylum accommodation, including any changes to that accommodation

- Whilst some were told in advance of their impending transfer from hotel to camp, or out of the camp, others reported being given 15 minutes notice of a move from hotel to camp, or camp to hotel, just time to pack, nor time to properly say goodbye or have sometimes to eat lunch before a long journey.
- They would then be taken in a taxi. Leaving a hotel to go to the camp, people were sometimes told by the taxi driver that they did not know where they were going, and some of these long journeys were taking place at night. The men think this was to avoid people resisting if they knew they were going to the camp, but their actual experience was bewilderment and anxiety because they had no idea whether this was to different accommodation, or for example, to an immigration detention centre or other such place.
- On arrival, people were given what they perceived to be assurances that their stay would be for a month, but some have been there since the camps opened in September 2020, so this was clearly not true.
- They said the worst thing was not knowing how long they would be there, if it was a month they could perhaps bear it, but knowing it may be several months and that nothing said by the staff could be trusted, people become depressed.
- In addition to this not knowing, and not trusting, the isolation of the camp itself caused people to feel shut off from society, and added to feelings of vulnerability and depression.
- One man commented that he has fled persecution by the political regime in his own country only to be used by the political regime in UK as a flag for the hostile environment, a threat to those hoping to come to UK.
- They said they could bear conditions in other countries on the way in the short-term because they knew that when they reached UK they would be treated properly. If they had known how it would be in the camps they would have stayed and endured the terrible conditions in Europe.
- Physical conditions in the camp caused additional stress, and it was perhaps more stressful to see them fixed just before the inspection – toilets fixed after not working for 3 months; people suddenly finding themselves in a room of two people instead of five or six; meals were brought to the rooms in Napier camp instead of being dished up in the communal area following the fire as the kitchen was not fixed. The quality of this food was much appreciated. In Penally it was said that the kitchen staff showed that they knew how to cook rice because the rice was good on the day Migrant Help went to do an inspection, although most often it was difficult to eat.
- The QARN website has a running post here, which collects media reports about concerns arising due to the use or proposed use of ‘contingency units’:
<http://qarn.org.uk/concerns-about-the-use-of-army-barracks-etc/>

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Other areas of concern:

'Refugees are the human face of international injustice' : Michael Bartlet, former UK Quaker Parliamentary Liaison Officer

I have seen a copy of a letter from the Home Office and Folkestone & Hythe District Council to residents local to Napier camp dated 9 February 2021, a copy of which is here: <http://qarn.org.uk/concerns-about-the-use-of-army-barracks-etc/> . It says 'despite best efforts a number of those accommodated at the site have tested positive for coronavirus recently'; and talks about how they are minimising the risk to those on site and the wider community. There is strong suggestion in the letter that the fault for the positive tests, the disturbances that led to the fire, and risk to the local community lies with the asylum seekers who are being accommodated in this 'safe, suitable and warm' housing. This is a shameless displacement of any responsibility for their discarding of the duty of care by forcing people into a situation where Covid-19 could run riot, and where a build-up of tensions within the camp cannot be surprising in the circumstances described elsewhere in this document.

Language matters: challenging the language of asylum and migration 'The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.' James 3, 5

The letter is inflammatory, and incites local people to be fearful of those people living in the camp and seeking asylum who by implication are ungrateful because they would otherwise be homeless. Disgraceful.

In contrast, the [Home Office](#) ignored advice from Public Health England that housing asylum seekers in dormitories in army barracks was inappropriate in a pandemic, months before an outbreak of 120 Covid cases. <https://qarn.org.uk/home-office-ignored-covid-advice-not-to-put-asylum-seekers-in-barracks>

When scabies has been caught by men whilst at the camp, how easy is it for the Covid-19 virus to also move amongst them.

How perceptive of the resident who said that he fled political persecution, and was not expecting to find that in UK he is now being used by politicians in UK to further the hostile environment.

The strategy for reducing the requirement for contingency asylum accommodation in the short- to medium-term (to the end of 2021-22) and longer-term (through to the end of the current Asylum Accommodation and Support Contracts)

The AASC contractors are tasked with accommodating all those people who come into the asylum system. They have no influence over the speed with which people enter or leave the accommodation or how fast the Home Office manages people's asylum claims. There have been numerous strategies to deal with backlogs in the asylum system, for example the 'legacy' system that began in 2007.

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In 2020 the Home Office was already unable to manage the processing of cases in a timely way, leading to significant backlogs, and comments by the Home Secretary, Priti Patel that the system is broken, which translates into unacceptable stress for people who are seeking asylum on the receiving end of the system, awaiting a decision on their asylum application.

I recognise that there has been exceptional pressure on a system that was already not coping before the coronavirus, and suggest that consideration be given to implementing a signalling system that would indicate a need to find a remedy before the system is overwhelmed either by unresolved cases awaiting a decision, or by extraneous factors such as the pandemic. This may alleviate the need for 'contingency units.

'Our historic testimonies to equality, justice, peace, simplicity and truth challenge us to alleviate suffering and seek positive social change.' Quaker Faith and Practice 8.11

This pandemic has created an exceptional set of circumstances and difficulties which need to be tackled with creative thinking. The Home Office has chosen to not exercise its power under [Immigration Rules part 11A: temporary protection](#) to grant Leave to Remain in exceptional circumstances. This does not go far enough for this situation, but the Home Office emphasis on find and remove, and increasing the tensions of an already hostile environment demonstrate a clear lack of willingness to find a humanitarian way forward in these exceptional circumstances.

The bottom line is that the Home Office has, at best and being very generous, allowed the above conditions to prevail by their lack of care, but it seems that there is a deliberate policy to promote and continue the hostile environment, whilst paying substantial sums to the private sector.

This needs to be brought in-house away from private businesses who are making a profit from the misery of others, such that accommodation is managed for example by Local Authorities.

Give people settled status and they will be more likely and able to come forward for the Covid vaccine, for testing and treatment, they will be able to access housing and food, and to contribute to society. Please note the posts on the <http://statusnow4all.org> website in relation to the vaccine.

There are strong moral, political, practical, and financial arguments to support the campaign for *Indefinite Leave to Remain/settled status for all who are undocumented or in the legal process.

To repeat:

*We call upon the British and Irish States to act immediately so that all undocumented, destitute and migrant people in the legal process in both the UK and Ireland are granted Status Now, as in *Leave to Remain. In this way every human, irrespective of their nationality or citizenship can access healthcare, housing, food and the same sources of income from the State as everyone else.*

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Sheila Mosley

19.2.2021