

**All-Party Parliamentary Group on Immigration Detention
Meeting on the inspection of Napier and Penally barracks**

Wednesday 17 March 2021, 10.00-11.30

Online via Zoom platform

Attendees

Chair:

Alison Thewliss MP (SNP)

Other parliamentarians:

Paul Blomfield MP (Labour)

Sir Peter Bottomley MP (Conservative)

Lord Dubs (Labour)

Richard Fuller MP (Conservative)

Baroness Hamwee (Liberal Democrat)

Baroness Lister of Burtersett (Labour)

Baroness Ludford (Liberal Democrat)

Anne McLaughlin MP (SNP)

Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP (Labour)

Lord Roberts of Llandudno (Liberal Democrat)

The Earl of Sandwich (Crossbencher)

Liz Saville-Roberts MP (Plaid Cymru)

Helen Hayes MP (Labour)

Parliamentary staff:

Isabelle Bull (Office of Holly Lynch MP)

Jacqui Connor (Office of John McDonnell MP)

Naomi Grant (Office of Stephen Timms MP)

Kate Hardman (Office of Richard Fuller MP)

Andy Murphy (Office of Alison Thewliss MP)

Margaret Young (Office of Anne McLaughlin MP)

Catherine Frazer (Office of Carol Monaghan MP)

APPG Secretariat:

Dr Rachel Bingham (Medical Justice)

Emma Ginn (Medical Justice)

Elsbeth Macdonald (Medical Justice)

Speakers:

David Bolt (Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI))

Hindpal Singh Bhui (HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP))

Other participants:

A number of staff representatives from HMIP and ICIBI

Minutes

1. Welcome

1.1 The chair welcomed the speakers and attendees to the meeting of the APPG on Immigration Detention.

2. Initial remarks: Elspeth Macdonald, Medical Justice / APPG Secretariat

2.1 The barracks were just one example of what appeared to be a wider shift towards housing people seeking asylum in large-scale, institutional accommodation sites. The government had announced the previous day that the Penally site was closing. However, the Home Secretary had also shared her proposal to build new “reception centres” to house people while their asylum claims were assessed.

2.2 The Home Office’s direction of travel seemed to be towards greater use of such sites. This was very concerning. Such sites could never provide the safe, stable environment that people who have experienced trauma need in order to recover and rebuild their lives.

2.3 Asylum accommodation might appear to be beyond the remit of the APPG. However, large-scale, institutional sites like the barracks in fact shared many of the features of immigration detention. This included restrictions on people’s freedom of movement (e.g. curfews), a lack of agency and control, a lack of privacy and security features (e.g. barbed wire, dog patrols). The sites were also having similar impacts in terms of people’s health, including mental health. They could perhaps best be described as sites of “quasi-detention”. It was therefore important and appropriate for the group to discuss them.

3. David Bolt, ICIBI

3.1 Residents began arriving at Napier and Penally barracks in September 2020. ICIBI first became aware of issues at each site in October and were approached by the Welsh government and a third sector stakeholder to undertake an emergency inspection.

3.2 ICIBI began a dialogue with the Home Office to understand what was happening at the sites and to give them an early indication that an inspection was under consideration. Privately provided Covid “audits” were conducted at each site at the beginning of November. ICIBI requested and received copies these audit reports.

3.3 ICIBI's inspection was looking not just at the barracks sites, but at contingency accommodation more widely, including the use of hotels. There would likely be a requirement for contingency accommodation into the longer-term as there would likely be large numbers of asylum seekers in the system for at least a year or more. A call to submit evidence to the inspection was issued in January.

3.4 Issues were likely to arise in the inspection of the barracks that were not within ICIBI's competence. It had therefore sought additional support from HMIP.

3.5 ICIBI and HMIP visited the barracks sites in mid-February. ICIBI undertook a second visit to Napier barracks in early March. They had also engaged extensively with stakeholders and current and former residents at the sites.

4. Hindpal Singh Bhui, Inspection Team Leader, HMIP

4.1 HMIP had experience of inspecting large-scale accommodation sites such as prisons and immigration removal centres. It was happy to support ICIBI's inspection.

4.2 It was important to bear in mind that numbers had reduced significantly at each barracks site by the time of the inspectors' visits – from around 400 to 60 at Napier Barracks, and around 180 to 80 at Penally. The inspectors announced their visits in advance, so there had been some activity to prepare for the inspectors' arrival. Residents and staff made it clear to the inspectors that they were seeing the camps at their best.

4.3 The sites were opened as asylum accommodation in September 2020. They were originally designed for a very different purpose - to house military personnel for short periods of usually 1-2 weeks. To convert them and ensure they were suitable for use by people seeking asylum, a group with very different needs, would have been a significant challenge at any time, let alone during a pandemic.

4.6 **Home Office planning and oversight** - There was a need for clear thinking and safeguards for multi-occupancy accommodation; for proper planning and consultation with stakeholders and service providers; and to pay very serious attention to health risks. The Home Office had not adequately delivered on any of those requirements in relation to the barracks sites.

4.7 Accommodation contractors were given less than two weeks to make each site operational. Some work had been done to improve privacy and make repairs, but the inspectors found that both sites were still in a generally poor state at the time of their visits, despite the reduced numbers of residents.

4.8 The Home Office's oversight of both sites was poor. Home Office staff were not present at the sites and did not often visit.

4.9 **Health risks, including in relation to Covid-19** - Public Health England (PHE) advised the Home Office that opening multi-occupancy dormitory style accommodation during a pandemic was not in line with their guidance. Both PHE and Public Health Wales (PHW) clearly did not think it was a good idea to open this type of accommodation at that time.

4.10 Both PHE and PHW were concerned about Covid safety of each site, and outlined what mitigation would be required if the sites were opened e.g. the ability to isolate Covid-19 positive cases, and cohorting arrangements to contain any outbreak.

4.11 In the inspectors' view however, the cramped communal conditions and inability to cohort effectively at Napier, meant that once one person was infected, a large-scale outbreak of Covid-19 was virtually inevitable.

4.12 Conditions at both sites made effective social distancing difficult extremely difficult.

4.13 **Residents' sense of safety** - Residents at both sites were very worried about their safety. None of the residents at Napier who completed an inspection survey felt they had been kept safe, and the same was true for the majority of residents at Penally.

4.14 **Fire safety** - Fire safety failings were identified at Napier by the Crown Premises Fire Safety Inspectorate. These had not been addressed at the time of the inspection visit. Issues were also identified at Penally, but the work to address these had largely been completed.

4.15 **Safeguarding** - This was a central theme of inspection. There were serious safeguarding concerns at Napier in particular. The Home Office said that vulnerable people, for example those with mental health conditions or with potential histories of torture or trafficking, were not supposed to be accommodated at either site. However, people with these characteristics were present at both sites. Thirty-one people had been transferred out of Napier barracks due to safeguarding concerns that were only identified after arrival.

4.16 One third of residents who filled in the inspection survey disclosed mental health problems. One third of those at Napier said they had felt suicidal. There had been serious self-harm incidents at Napier, including an attempted hanging.

4.17 People at high risk of harm at Napier were placed in a decrepit isolation block that was unfit for habitation. It was small, filthy, damp, had peeling paint and no toilet or shower. At the time of the visit, the inspectors met one man who was having to isolate there because he had become ill. His living conditions were absolutely appalling.

4.18 **Safeguarding of children** - Residents who may have been children were also housed in the same isolation block, pending an age assessment. In one case a resident who may have been a child had been housed in the block for up to two weeks.

4.19 **General environment, including cleanliness** - the general environment at both sites was best described as impoverished. The sites were run down and there was little for residents to do. It was not suitable as long-term accommodation for anyone.

4.20 Cleanliness at both sites was variable at best, and made more difficult by the age of the buildings

4.21 **Staff and support** - more positively, residents reported that on the whole, on-site staff were friendly and treated them with respect. Migrant Help was also operating quite well at each site. Local voluntary groups were providing invaluable support, including with clothing, activities, signposting and communication with legal representatives.

4.22 **Provision of information** - residents were not provided with enough information. This led to misunderstandings and rumours, and had a corrosive effect on the collective mood at the sites. Residents did not know how long they would be accommodated at the sites. The Home Office had recently started video meetings with residents but these did not include updates on individuals' asylum claims, the issue on which residents most wanted information. The Home Office had not conducted any survey of residents to help understand their concerns.

4.23 Most residents were transferred to or from site at very short notice, often only a few hours.

4.4 **Overall impressions** - the inspectors left Penally thinking it provided poor treatment and conditions. They left Napier thinking it was an absolutely disgraceful environment.

4.5 Some limited improvements had been made at Napier since the visits, such as closure of the isolation block (see below). However, a huge amount of work would be needed to make either site suitable as asylum accommodation.

5. David Bolt

5.1 **Next steps in terms of inspection** – HMIP would write a report. The Chief Inspector would then send the report with a covering letter to the Home Office. (Post meeting update: ICIBI received the HMIP report on 19 March and sent it with a covering letter to the relevant Home Office Director General, copied to the Home Secretary, on 20 March.)

5.2 David was leaving his post on Sunday. The ICIBI team would continue the inspection. There were significant issues in relation to hotels and other forms of asylum accommodation. Some of the issues that had come up in relation to Napier and Penally were also relevant to these other types of accommodation.

6. Dr Rachel Bingham, Clinical Advisor, Medical Justice / APPG Secretariat

6.1 Medical Justice's remit did not currently extend to the barracks, though this was under review. Medical Justice clinicians had assessed people housed at Tinsley House Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) while it was being used as bail accommodation however. Immediately prior to arriving at Tinsley House, these people had been accommodated at Napier barracks.

6.2 In terms of risks to health and wellbeing, there was an overlap between what clinicians saw in contingency accommodation like the barracks and Tinsley House IRC, and in immigration detention. Medical Justice clinicians had assessed people who had been at the barracks as being very vulnerable, for example with serious mental health issues including severe depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. When exploring the cause of people's symptoms, clinicians were finding a clear deterioration of people's mental health associated with being accommodated at the barracks. One client described Napier as a "re-run" of being a political prisoner in his own country.

6.3 Clients who were survivors of torture and trafficking reported experiencing suicidal thoughts for the first time in their lives whilst housed at the barracks.

6.4 The reasons for this degree of impact were complicated, but were likely to relate to a combination of environmental stressors and reminders of past experiences at a time when people needed to be able to process and recover. People who had experienced multiple losses and traumatic events needed to be in stable and secure accommodation where they could rest, feel safe and focus on recovery. Given the inspectors' findings, the barracks clearly did not provide such an environment.

6.5 In summary, aspects of Medical Justice's knowledge and clinical research on the mental and physical health impacts of immigration detention were also relevant to the new context of the barracks and other sites. Medical Justice was concerned to see the deterioration of health and wellbeing of the people housed at these sites. In the organisation's view, the sites were entirely inappropriate forms of accommodation.

7. Q & A

7.1 Liz Saville-Roberts MP – This was a watershed moment. The government announced yesterday that Penally was closing. In the inspectors' view, why had there been a different response for Napier, which the government said would remain open? It was interesting that there was an election taking place in Wales in 50 days time. There were also some issues in relation to asylum housing in Wales. Would this be picked up in the inspection?

7.2 David Bolt – the reasons for the different response were not clear. During ICIBI’s second visit on 4 March 2021, Clearsprings, the commercial provider for the barracks, was undertaking work to reconfigure some of the blocks at Napier and make them less communal. This seemed indicative of an intention to make use of the site for the longer-term. The changes seen on 4 March however looked quite makeshift and seemed wholly inadequate from a Covid-19 safety perspective.

7.3 Current residents had been told that they would be moved to different accommodation by 2 April. They were extremely concerned that new residents would arrive before this, putting them at risk from Covid, and delaying their departure. It was unclear if this would happen or not. It would be a very unwise approach in the Chief Inspector’s view.

7.4 The inspection’s focus was on contingency accommodation. However, there would be some reference to initial and dispersal accommodation, because the shortage in those areas is what caused the need for contingency accommodation.

7.5 Baroness Lister or Burtsett – the facts reported by the inspectors, particularly in relation to the lack of preparation and oversight, suggested that the Home Office simply did not care. What lessons should the Home Office learn from the inspection findings?

7.6 David Bolt – a key concern was the outsourcing of services to commercial providers. The Home Secretary retained responsibility for ensuring the proper delivery of those services – this responsibility could not be outsourced. Oversight of providers’ delivery by the Home Office was not sufficiently robust. This issue was particularly acute in relation to the barracks because any problems would have a direct impact on the lives of the residents.

7.7 Lord Roberts of Llandudno – the Home Office continued to assert that the sites were suitable and fit for purpose. This totally contradicted the inspectors’ findings. How could the Home Office be made to see what was going on?

7.8 Hindpal Singh Bhui – Ensuring the Home Office understood what was happening at ground level and took responsibility for it had been a problem for some time. This has been the case in immigration detention which has improved over time, under pressure. Taking responsibility should involve, for example, visiting asylum accommodation to understand what was happening.

7.9 There also seemed to be a persistent loss of focus on the individual human being at the end of the Home Office processes. There was no contradiction between retaining that focus and running an efficient department.

7.10 Paul Blomfield MP – the situation was shocking. The Chief Inspector had observed there was likely to be a continued need for asylum contingency accommodation over the longer term. Could he expand on this? There was a risk that large-scale sites could become the Home Office’s default approach for housing asylum seekers.

7.11 David Bolt – The Home Office had struggled over many years to manage its asylum process. There had been recurring issues around the speed of asylum decision-making for example. It was well known that the numbers of people in the asylum system had increased significantly and a temporary pause on asylum accommodation evictions during the Covid-19 pandemic had increased the demand

for asylum accommodation. It seemed fair to assume that the higher numbers and demand would remain for some time.

7.12 There was high demand for accommodation, and it was difficult for the Home Office to meet that demand via dispersed accommodation. As such they were looking for other options. Clearsprings had explained they were exploring hostel-style accommodation as a possible alternative to the barracks and hotels.

7.13 It had been a serious error of judgement, however, to think that the barracks sites could ever be made suitable for asylum accommodation purposes. It might be possible to make hostel-style accommodation suitable, but it was not ideal.

7.14 Baroness Hamwee – the Home Office would not share the full detail of every contract it enters into. But had any work been done to look at the basic requirements or criteria for providing accommodation contracts? That might be something that parliamentarians could explore.

7.15 David Bolt – the Home Office would expect providers to apply the appropriate housing standard, for example the Welsh Housing Quality Standard. The standards were basic but quite straightforward. However, it was one thing to have the standard and another to monitor and enforce them. Previous inspections of initial and dispersed accommodation, for example, had found sites where there were serious defects which were left unaddressed.

7.16 Baroness Lister – the issue was not just one of housing standards. The cohort in question, people seeking asylum, had particular needs. Had there been any consultation with specialists about what those needs were?

7.17 David Bolt – The Home Office had said that people at Napier and Penally barracks had been assessed as not being vulnerable – i.e. that they were capable of living at the sites. Some might ask whether people seeking asylum were by definition vulnerable.

7.18 In any case the UK's asylum 'journey' did not include any Home Office-managed assessment of people's mental and physical health or their needs in relation to this. For example, the initial screening interview was merely a series of questions and self-declaration. Asylum seekers often report that at the time of the interview, they are not in a good state of mind to engage effectively or to open up about their past experiences. There was a real question over whether the asylum system should focus more on the issue of understanding the person's health needs at the outset.

7.19 Isabelle Bull – There was a lack of transparency around the advice the Home Office was receiving from local health authorities, in particular in relation to Covid compliance. The Home Secretary had told the Home Affairs Committee that measures at the barracks had been Covid compliant for example. How might this be improved?

7.20 David Bolt – ICIBI has seen the Home Secretary's evidence session at the Home Affairs Committee. The HAC Chair had sought clarification from her about the advice her department received from PHE and others in relation to the barracks. This request was still outstanding.

7.21 It was hard to imagine how social distancing was practically possible at either site, particularly when numbers were high. For example, at Napier barracks, there was dormitory-style accommodation of up to 28 people, and residents had to use communal showers and toilets.

7.22 **Paul Blomfield MP** – there was a concern that the Home Office might view large and remote centres as attractive solutions. The APPG should call this out before it became a strategy.

8. Agreed actions

8.1 The chair noted the wide range of attendees at the meeting. This demonstrated the level of cross-party concern about the topic, both in the Commons and the Lords.

8.2 The APPG would write to the Home Office to raise various concerns discussed in the meeting, including what lessons the department was learning from the findings, questions around oversight and accountability, and the inappropriateness of large-scale institutional sites as accommodation.

8.3 There were ongoing efforts to secure a debate (e.g. urgent question, backbench debate) on the barracks and the inspectors' findings. The secretariat would advise members if these were successful.

8.4 The group should conduct a more in-depth inquiry into the issue. This would provide extra scrutiny of the issue, which was important. If possible, it would be useful to have the findings ready for when the new asylum bill came to Parliament. The secretariat would share an inquiry proposal as soon as possible.

9. Meeting closed