

APPG on Immigration Detention
Inquiry into 'quasi-detention': the UK Government's use of large-scale, institutional sites as asylum accommodation

Quasi Detention Centres

1. We share the serious concerns and critical findings of the ICIBI in relation to Napier and Penally barracks.
2. Allies for Justice is group of people with first-hand experience of immigration and the asylum process in the UK. We are facilitated by the charity Detention Action.
3. As a group that consists of people with this first-hand experience of immigration detention, in our understanding and interpretation sites such as Napier barracks bear many of the worst trademarks of immigration detention. This is the case both in terms of structure and, more critically, on the impacts that they could have on those held there.
4. We believe sites such as Napier barracks or similar settings are not suitable for the purpose of accommodating or even receiving people seeking sanctuary. Such people are often victims of torture, modern slavery, or human trafficking, or have suffered other human rights violations. We strongly believe that they should instead be housed and supported in the community, with access to essential support and services.
5. Holding people seeking sanctuary, who are often victims of torture and/or other serious abuses, in former military barracks could itself be extremely traumatic for them as well as an unbearable experience. It could be the case that their former persecutors were military or security agents from their countries of origin. This could inflict a lot of mental trauma, which is an additional layer of trauma inflicted by being held in an institutional setting.
6. We hear the argument by the Government that Napier barracks was suitable for army personnel and, hence, it is suitable for people seeking sanctuary, which is an argument we strongly reject. It is worth remembering that military settings such as the Napier barracks are designed for military personnel who are mentally and physically well-trained to be resilient as opposed to vulnerable people seeking sanctuary.
7. We are concerned about the lack of vulnerability screening in these sites. This makes it impossible to determine essential mental and physical health needs and other essential safeguarding for this population, who have overwhelmingly gone through horrific experience before arriving to the UK and during the journey to the UK.
8. This new practice of repurposing former military barracks or other government sites following quick alterations to house people seeking sanctuary is simply sending a message to this population that all they deserve is a mere roof over their head and three meals per day, and that other basic essentials are a luxury they don't deserve.

Mental Health & legal representation challenge in these quasi detention

9. We have members in our group with direct experience of being held in immigration detention, such as Harmondsworth and Colnbrook detention centres. We are well aware of the impact of immigration detention on mental health and physical health. We are also familiar with serious lack of access to essential support, such as legal representations, mental health support and restricted access to the community. All these have a serious consequence on your immigration or asylum claim as well as your welfare. We hear similar accounts by the residents of Napier barracks; that is something we are not surprised about.
10. We include a quote from one of our members with direct experience of immigration detention:

“quite often in settings like these, you find yourself fighting with the deadline to access legal representation which is not quite easy in a detention setting, with strictly limited access to both internal and external correspondence, and as all this is taking place, you are also working against Home Office swift attempts to rush through your case to an ultimate removal, it becomes impossible to have effective representation and preparation. Most people held in these detention centres, while rushing against time and pushing against the Home Office that is determined to restrict you from having a proper judicial process and representation. I have seen people become withdrawn and or resort to being mute and silent and develop some other mental health depression and anxieties at the wrong time when they are supposed to be fighting for their life against removal. In contrast, Home Office will have all the advantages at hand and tries all they can to frustrate any effort to have a specialised support.”

We here similar accounts from the former and present residents of Napier barracks.

Safeguards, privacy and threats against being proactive and vocal in these centres.

11. One of the most concerning developments is the news that asylum interviews are being conducted in Napier barracks. We are not aware that any asylum interviews are being carried out while people are in other initial accommodation in the current system. We would like to raise serious concerns with the APPG about this, as we believe, when taken together with the serious issues that we have highlighted above regarding Napier barracks, this site is in no way suitable to conduct asylum interviews.
12. We emphasise the importance of conducting asylum interviews in an environment that feels safe, with the access to proper legal representations and prior vulnerability screening to examine whether a claimant needs specialised intervention before they have their asylum interviews i.e. a medico-legal Report by Freedom from Torture or similar body. Not having these safeguards in place first before conducting interviews in Napier barracks or any similar setting could have serious consequences.
13. We are concerned that residents could agree to have their asylum interviews being conducted out of desperation to escape the trauma of being held in a setting like Napier. In this environment, they may be making ill-informed decisions, without having proper legal and other essential interventions in the first place.

14. The nature of asylum interviews means that they can be highly traumatic, forcing the claimant to share and retell the trauma and persecution they were subjected to. The interviews are also very personal; it is often the case that even the claimant's own families do not know what they went through as you don't feel strong or safe or sure to share with your own family. Therefore, we emphasise that we do share serious concerns about asylum interviews are being carried out in Napier barracks.

Overcrowding, COVID outbreak safety and security of people and their belongings

15. Recent reports, as well as Public Health England, have deemed these sites are not Covid safe due to its dormitory type structure and more than 20 people having to share one dormitory. It has been disclosed that there was a Covid outbreak in Napier with almost 200 positive cases. This comes as no surprise, as it is impossible to make such a setting Covid safe.
16. We are also concerned about the news that residents who talked to journalists about the situation in the barracks had received threats by the staff that they will be penalised for speaking up. We believe this is a serious assault on peoples' right to speak up against the injustice they are facing.

In conclusion, as those with experience of detention centres and those with experience of navigating the asylum system, we believe sites such as the Napier barracks or any similar settings are not suitable to accommodate people seeking sanctuary. These sites are established to disconnect this population from the outside world and this sort of hostile strategies are being used to deter people seeking sanctuary in the UK.

These quasi detentions sites are a disregard to the conventions of human and people's rights. It is inconceivable that a country such as the UK, that repeatedly boasts about the proud history of welcoming those fleeing persecution, wars and tyranny, is treating people seeking sanctuary as less than human beings.

We also reject the Home Office claim that the influx in asylum applications and the asylum backlog is the reason why the Government had to explore these type of sites to fulfil the increased demand for asylum accommodations. We believe the opposite: the number of new asylum applications have reduced over the last two years. Any asylum backlog at this time is of the Home Office's own making due to inefficiency and poor decision-making.

Allies for Justice

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