



**Welsh Refugee Coalition submission: APPG inquiry into 'quasi-detention'
25th June 2021**

1. Who has been / is being accommodated at the site(s) and for how long?

A maximum of 234 men aged between 18-35 years old were accommodated at Penally MoD camp in Pembrokeshire from September 2020 to March 2021. The camp is situated in a small community of just 848 people. The site was leased by the Home Office for 6 months from MoD using emergency powers. Despite assurances that the site was used as Initial Accommodation, we know that many men remained at the camp well in excess of 4-6 weeks with most men housed there for several months or more. The Welsh Refugee Coalition is also aware that residents at the camp included at least one age disputed minor who was subsequently dispersed out of the camp to Cardiff, as well as other extremely vulnerable men for whom the accommodation was entirely inappropriate at the outset.

2. What are the key features of the site(s) that generate concern, and how do these features impact on residents, with regard in particular to their:

The Welsh Refugee Coalition believes that military barracks with prison-like conditions are not suitable for housing vulnerable people. The Penally site lacked safety, was overcrowded, had poor food quality, lacked access to cooking and laundry facilities. Placing people seeking asylum in places of deliberate isolation hinders their ability to access essential support to progress their asylum claim, acquire English language skills and address any physical or mental health trauma they may face.

Physical health

The public health concerns around the potential for a widespread Covid outbreak at the Penally camp are well documented. The Red Cross [Far from Home report](#), for example, highlights that BRC staff attending Penally barracks stated it was not possible to social distance. There were also concerns about the state of general repair at the site including a lack of suitable heating and insulation which meant that during the winter months men at the site reported their health suffering due to the cold and damp conditions. Other concerns were raised about the quality of food provided on site.

For men living at the camp there was also the threat of actual physical harm from far-right extremist protestors outside the camp with instances of a man living at the camp being attacked with a bottle and needing to seek hospital treatment, for example. The Red Cross Far from Home research which engaged with 88 people reported that most of these individuals didn't feel safe - some because of tensions between people outside the camp and residents inside the camp but also due to previous experiences of imprisonment.

The Red Cross Far From Home report stated that most people Red Cross teams had supported in Penally Barracks reported having no health screening before or after arriving. Residents also reported long delays before accessing medical treatment and some were in pain for a long period.

Mental health

People housed at Penally have reported their mental health and that of those around them declining rapidly, with frequent reports of self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Members of the Welsh Refugee Coalition heard reports that mental health support was rare and difficult to access. The position of Penally was also isolated with a lack of support available to those residing there. There were no specialist refugee organisations in the area, or the same level of resettlement support that you see in the dispersal cities like Cardiff and Swansea. The geographical location of the camp – 2 hours by car from Cardiff and over 1 hour 15 minutes from Swansea - made it challenging for existing third sector groups with specialist experience of providing vital and trauma informed wellbeing support to people seeking asylum including ESOL classes and sports activities to access the site. It also meant that people living at the camp had limited access to legal advice and support on their asylum claim.

Communication

Initial communication with men moved to the Penally camp was poor. Men, particularly individuals with little or no English, did not receive adequate explanation of where they were or why they had been moved - 81% of the 88 residents that engaged with Red Cross Far from Home research said that they had not received translated information about the site, health measures or support available. Many men in the camp thought they were being detained. Welsh Refugee Coalition members heard cases of men dispersed to the camp from Bristol contacting their English teachers there in distress because they had no idea where they were or why they had been put in the camp. In addition, when men were dispersed out of the camp, they were given inadequate information of where they would be dispersed to and what support services would be available there.

Ability to access legal advice, to challenge their placement in such accommodation, and to exercise their right to claim asylum

The location of the Penally MoD camp is remote with lack of access to services, including legal advice.

Ability to access specialist support e.g. for victims of trafficking, age disputed minors, etc?

The lack of specialist third sector organisations in and around Pembrokeshire and the fact that on site staff were not always properly trained to support people seeking asylum undoubtedly had a negative impact on access to specialist, trauma informed support.

Community volunteering support

Under extremely difficult and challenging circumstances, members of the community in Pembrokeshire worked together to welcome the men housed at Penally and to provide support and friendship. More information about this support can be found here <https://cityofsanctuary.org/2021/04/28/penally-a-story-of-solidarity-and-victory/> The friendships forged between men housed at Penally and residents local to Pembrokeshire have opened a new world of language, culture and understanding of global issues among local people and greater empathy for people fleeing violence, war and persecution. The friendships developed will endure beyond the closure of the camp. Indeed, the views of some of the community volunteers is that *“They closed it because it failed to create the expected social divisions.”*

The community support provided included:

- A buddy system connecting local people with residents at Penally.

- Online English teaching one to one.
- Sanctuary days – bringing people together through shared activities in a Covid secure way
- A clothing distribution centre for clothing, toiletries and other donations.
- A “bubble of protection” against the far-right by monitoring threatening activity and reporting to the police.
- Liaison with other organisations to provide a bike bank so men could leave the camp under their own steam.

3. What mechanisms, if any, exist at the site(s) to identify and safeguard vulnerable people, and are these mechanisms adequate?

The Social Care Institute has stated that waiting for ‘evidence’ of vulnerability, harm or risk to arise puts people in significant danger and should be considered under safeguarding measures.¹ Welsh Refugee Coalition members are concerned that definitions of vulnerability in the asylum accommodation (reception centre) regulations look more at high risks of harm rather than just risk. The devastating consequences of not having effective risk assessment or safeguarding practices in place for vulnerable people who have subsequently harmed themselves or attempted suicide needs to be recognised. We would like to see better consideration of the vulnerabilities people seeking asylum face and better safeguarding systems put in place.

The Red Cross Far From Home Report notes that :

- The Home Office stated all residents at military barracks are screened for vulnerability, modern slavery and exploitation but doctors and medical organisations attending the barracks are supporting people with serious health conditions and vulnerabilities and have reported witnessing deteriorating mental and physical health.²
- Most people Red Cross staff supported in Penally Barracks reported having no health screening before or after arriving.
- Military barracks by their nature can re-traumatise people who have fled war, persecution, imprisonment and other traumatic situations.

4. What changes, if any, have been observed in the way that the asylum/immigration claims of residents at the site(s) are being processed, and what implications might these changes have?

The number of people waiting over 6 months for a decision on their asylum claim doubled over the course of 2020 and this impacts on the reliance of Home Office support.

5. What questions arise with regard to the lawfulness of the site(s)?

¹ Social Care Institute for Excellence (2020), Safeguarding Adults: What are the six principles of safeguarding? <https://www.scie.org.uk/safeguarding/adults/introduction/six-principles/cipiles>

² Written evidence submitted by Doctors of the World, the Helen Bamber Foundation, Forrest Medico-Legal Services and Freedom from Torture (2021), Asylum Accommodation: clinical harm caused by the use of barracks as housing for asylum seekers <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22982/html/>

6. **What effect do the site(s) and any changes in processing observed at them have on the known backlog of pending asylum claims and the number of people seeking asylum left ‘in limbo’?**
7. **What recommendations (both short-term and long-term) do you have for the government regarding the site(s) and others like them?**

Welsh Refugee Coalition members have seen a number of people seeking asylum moved into hotel accommodation both during the Covid pandemic period (from March 2020) but also prior to this in December 2019 lasting for periods far longer than 3-4 weeks. For many years Cardiff housed the sole Initial Accommodation Centre in Wales and use of hotels was a feature of Initial Accommodation prior to the pandemic. Usage escalated substantially after the problematic transition to the new Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contract (AASC)³ which led to the closure of Lynx House which previously accommodated most IA residents. Since the pandemic, hotels, barracks, and alternative forms of temporary accommodation have been utilised in other parts of Wales such as Swansea and most recently Penally. Initial accommodation properties in Cardiff should be located centrally to vital health and wellbeing services, community mental health teams, hospitals, a number of different legal aid providers, and numerous third sector organisations and charities working in the asylum and refugee sector.

Initial Accommodation is intended to be temporary before individuals are moved into dispersal accommodation while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. The Home Office advises that the period of stay in initial accommodation should not be longer than 3-4 weeks before being moved into dispersal accommodation.⁴

We welcome the long-awaited closure of the Penally military barracks and we call for the closure of Napier Barracks. Welsh Refugee Coalition members believe that the opening and use of Penally was contrary to the aims of the Welsh Government’s Nation of Sanctuary Plan which sets out a clear vision for Wales to become a welcoming home for those seeking sanctuary in the UK.⁵ There was a complete lack of local consultation and we understood concerns from local residents who were not consulted prior to the site going live. Indeed, there was only one week between initial reports in the press and the first people being moved on site. An article appearing in the Western Telegraph on 15th September, 6 days before the first arrivals (on 21st September), stated that the site’s potential use was still “*unconfirmed*”.⁶ Indeed, it appears consultation with Welsh Government and the Local Authority did not take place until days before the site opened. An FOI request sent to Welsh Government shows that the first written exchange on this issue took place on 13th September and highlights that on the 11th September Pembrokeshire Council officials were unaware of the proposal.⁷

The rapidity of the opening of the site at Penally and lack of engagement suggested that the Home Office had not ensured it was sufficiently prepared to provide the volume of accommodation needed to house people entitled to access accommodation support due to the pandemic. However, we would highlight that hotels were in use across South Wales as IA prior to the pandemic due to failures by the Home Office and its contracted providers and this lack of capacity in the IA estate was exacerbated by the pandemic. Welsh Refugee Coalition members welcomed the Home Office’s decision to pause evictions due to the public health

³ [Wake Up Call: How Government Contracts Fail People Seeking Asylum \(2020\)](#)

⁴ [A Home Office Guide to Living in Asylum Accommodation – English \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Nation of Sanctuary Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan \(gov.wales\)](#)

⁶ [Penally Training Camp’s use for asylum seekers is not confirmed by UK Government | Western Telegraph](#)

⁷ [at1sn14343doc15.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#)

crisis, however we believe greater emphasis should have been put on finding accommodation that was safe, secure and community-based rather than hotel or barracks accommodation. Initial accommodation is not a long-term or sustainable form of accommodation as determined by the Home Office. Welsh Refugee Coalition members therefore believe it should not be used for any longer than 3-4 weeks. We would also like to see all Home Office accommodation in Wales complying with the Welsh Housing Quality Standard as stated in the AASC with regard to room sharing between unrelated adults.⁸

In terms of widening dispersal areas in Wales:

Welsh Refugee Coalition members believe that asylum accommodation must be safe, and located within the community where access to appropriate, trauma-informed support is available. We therefore welcome people seeking asylum being accommodated within communities and would support widening dispersal areas across the United Kingdom through close work with interested local authorities and local communities. Widening dispersal areas may help to shorten the waiting time for dispersal accommodation and reduce reliance on using hotels as initial accommodation. However, in-depth prior consultation and planning is key, as well as liaison with communities before any accommodation is set up. Tangible and constructive suggestions and recommendations that will help these new LAs to provide better services to people seeking asylum are needed. There are best practice examples of engagement from across the UK, for example the opening of the IA in Derby resulted in very few objections as Derby City of Sanctuary had worked with the local authority to engage with the local community.

8. Any other issues generating concern not covered by the above?

The Home Office's negative rhetoric in the media and divisive, dehumanising language used to describe people seeking asylum in the UK creates an environment and culture of hostility and hatred. The deliberate 'othering' of people seeking asylum is counter to the Home Office PREVENT agenda which is meant to respond to ideological challenge and those that promote it and address vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values including individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance. It was well known that far-right extremist groups were deliberately targeting temporary asylum accommodation such as hotels and barracks. Despite this fact, the Home Office did nothing to consult or prepare either the relevant authorities in Pembrokeshire or the local community for the influx of far-right extremists that brought hate, racism and violence to a small coastal community of less than 850 people. Community cohesion officers in Pembrokeshire are still reckoning with the potential long term impacts of such far-right extremism on the local community and how to prevent this fuelling more hate in future. This has not only adversely affected the men in the camp but local people offering a hand of friendship to men housed at the camp, who have also suffered vitriolic abuse and intimidation.

⁸ [Layout 1 \(housinglin.org.uk\)](https://housinglin.org.uk)