

# Welsh Refugee Council

Empowering asylum seekers and refugees to build new futures in Wales



## APPG ON IMMIGRATION DETENTION: INQUIRY INTO 'QUASI-DETENTION'

### Call for evidence on the UK Government's use of large-scale institutional sites as asylum accommodation: Welsh Refugee Council response focusing on the use of Penally Camp in Penally, South Wales.

1. The Welsh Refugee Council is a charity with 30 years' experience working with asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. We are driven by a passion for human rights, equality and social justice and a desire to make Wales a welcoming nation of sanctuary for those seeking our protection. We help victims of torture, persecution, and war to build futures in Wales through specialist advice, support and advocacy services. We provide urgent support for those in the asylum process and seek to ease the transition to life as a refugee.
2. The use of sites such as Penally Camp to house refugees and asylum seekers is problematic for several reasons, not least the suitability of housing people fleeing war and persecution in a former army barracks. We have heard first-hand from clients about the traumatic psychological impact this can have on their mental health. In addition, we, along with other advocacy groups, individuals and the Welsh Government have repeatedly raised concerns about the health and safety of the site at Penally during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. In our evidence we have sought to answer the questions posed by this inquiry and set out the wide range of concerns and issues we have witnessed in our work with clients housed at the Penally Camp. Whilst the camp has now been closed there are significant lessons to be learned by the Home Office. Our caseworkers worked with over 70 residents through to when the camp closed in March 2021 and visited the camp in person on numerous occasions.

#### Covid-19 compliance

4. One of the primary concerns raised by our caseworkers was the lack of compliance with basic Covid-19 regulations. This included:
  - Multiple observations of Camp staff not complying with Covid regulations
  - Large gatherings in communal areas with no evidence of social distancing

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- Insufficient hand sanitizer at entrances and in toilets
  - Visitors seen walking in and out of buildings without being asked to sign in
5. We were also concerned about residents being moved on and off the site from and to mixed housing with other people who may or not have been exposed to Covid. Our caseworkers were never able to get confirmation that testing was being carried out when this happened, despite raising this at multi-agency meetings. Our concerns reflected those raised by the Hywel Dda University Health Board<sup>1</sup>, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons<sup>2</sup> and other organisations who worked with residents at the site.

### **Accommodation**


6. Penally Camp is a disused army training facility and, given the Home Office only provided contractors with two weeks' notice before using it to house vulnerable asylum seekers, it is not surprising that a report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (CIBI) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) described conditions as "impoverished, run-down and unsuitable for long-term accommodation"<sup>3</sup>.
7. Our caseworkers found too many residents living together in each room and sharing toilets, showers and other essential communal areas. Toilets were located outside of their sleeping accommodation, an unpleasant experience in the cold and wet weather of winter. There were no locks which, as well as limiting privacy, meant that there were often instances of residents using the wrong facilities (a concern with covid-19 restrictions). The housing provider initially refused to fit locks, but locks were then installed just prior to the CIBI/HMIP audit. Frequent blockages meant that toilets and showers were often not useable.
8. Although the accommodation management insisted bedding was changed at least weekly, some residents complained that bed sheets were only replaced every few weeks and there were numerous other complaints about the lack of cleaning, particularly in the toilet and shower facilities.
9. There was no WiFi on site for most of the time the camp was open, it was only installed a few weeks prior to closure. In many cases this effectively cut residents off from the outside world and made it difficult for them to communicate

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hduhb.nhs.wales/about-us/governance-arrangements/statutory-committees/quality-safety-and-experience-assurance-committee-qseac/qseac/extraordinary-quality-safety-and-experience-assurance-committee-meeting-13-november-2020/item-2-3-health-response-to-the-use-of-the-mod-tra/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/an-inspection-of-the-use-of-contingency-asylum-accommodation-key-findings-from-site-visits-to-penally-camp-and-napier-barracks>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/an-inspection-of-the-use-of-contingency-asylum-accommodation-key-findings-from-site-visits-to-penally-camp-and-napier-barracks>



with family or access services. Some residents told us that this lack of access to a good internet connection made it harder for them to access resources that would help them know and assert their rights or compile evidence.

### **Physical and mental health**


10. Many of the residents our caseworkers engaged with had mental health problems that they said were exacerbated by conditions in the camp. In particular our caseworkers engaged with residents who had fled from Eretria, Iraq or Iran who had been interned prior to journeying here. They described the camp – fences, barbed wire, uniformed guards – as triggering night terrors, panic attacks, anxiety, emotional outbursts and other symptoms often associated with PTSD.
11. Another issue that was often raised by residents was a lack of clarity or understanding of why they were in the camp and how long they were going to be there. Our caseworkers described this as a major stress factor for many residents, impacting on their mental health. Many had been moved from other accommodation across the UK without them understanding why. The process of being relocated to what for many appeared to be a prison camp, without reason or any indication of for how long, was extremely stressful.
12. Another common issue raised by residents was the poor quality of the food provided and standards of hygiene, which at times became a health concern. This included reports of residents being given out of date food at the tuck shop.

### **Specialist support and legal advice**

13. Whilst the Home Office stated that no vulnerable people would be sent to Penally Camp<sup>4</sup>, we were concerned that the right checks were not being undertaken to ensure this was the case. We heard multiple instances of health screenings not being carried out prior to residents being moved to the camp. Our caseworkers considered the majority of residents they worked with to be vulnerable people and were unaware of any on-site specialist support being available. Residents with identified concerns were taken to an off-site doctor. Our caseworkers were aware of instances of residents being given medication which they did not understand. In one instance this led to a resident being referred to safeguarding on-site after indicating self-harm and suicidal ideation, having run out of his medication almost three weeks early.
14. We had major concerns with residents' access to legal advice. We found that many had not been signposted to legal support, with some having solicitors in other cities (i.e. London) and struggling to access them. We found a lot of

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<sup>4</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-11/atishn14343doc12.pdf>




confusion from residents about their immigration solicitors and the Judicial Review solicitors who were challenging the legalities of the camp, with many not knowing the difference or understanding who they should be talking to. Our caseworkers spent a lot of time helping clients understand the difference.

15. We found several residents without any solicitors whilst some had solicitors who supported them with asylum claims but declined to aid relocation requests due to their package of support not including that service. Some residents complained about individual solicitors not responding to calls relating to their asylum cases, nor providing frequent updates, or, in some examples, not requesting case documents such as interview transcripts. In these instances, we subsequently obtained them on their behalf via Subject Access Requests.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

16. For most residents we worked with their experience of living at Penally Camp was traumatic and difficult. They were physically, socially and economically isolated from their local community. These factors, coupled with their existing trauma, created a situation of volatility and unhappiness. Many struggled with a lack of privacy, with some telling us that they were ashamed to be seen or heard crying or struggling to come to terms with the idea that they came here for help and were instead placed into what felt like a prison camp. We found several instances of residents not raising complaints formally as they feared doing so would impact on their asylum status.
17. Whilst we recognise that housing refugees and asylum seekers during the pandemic was a difficult and complex issue, the use of Penally Camp was clearly wrong. **We would argue that former military facilities should not be used to house vulnerable people often feeling war and persecution.**
18. However, if the Home Office were to use large-scale institutional sites for accommodation in the future, we would make the following recommendations:
- i. That local communities, service providers and authorities be consulted in good time prior to a decision being made to use a site. This should prevent some of the issues we found with inadequate support and services available locally.
  - ii. That a clear and transparent standard be set, in consultation with groups representing asylum seekers and refugees, for the quality and cleanliness of accommodation, and that it be independently and regularly reviewed throughout the use of the facility.

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- iii. That all accommodation provide access to privacy for residents. Residents should not be housed in communal accommodation without any private space available.
  - iv. That all residents are provided with information regarding their move to the site in advance, in alternative languages if required, including the reason for the move and likely duration of their time on the camp. They should be provided with a guide to their new accommodation, the local area and services.
  - v. That all residents undergo a full health assessment prior to being moved to the site, with any who are deemed to be vulnerable (including those with a history of interment) being provided with alternative accommodation. Residents should be provided with a copy of this health assessment.
  - vi. That all residents have access to on-site mental health support and are signposted to specialist services if required. Any residents whose health gets worse should have a follow-up health assessment and if necessary, be moved from the camp.
  - vii. All residents should be made aware of available support services, including those provided by voluntary organisations, and organisations providing support services should be allowed regular and unrestricted access to meet with their clients.
  - viii. All residents should be made aware of how to raise any concerns or make complaints, and how these will be dealt with, and made aware that they will face no detriment for raising concerns.

### Case Study:


The interviewee, will be referred to as Ali, for the purpose of this report

Ali, 22, arrived to the UK this September and after about a month, was sent to penally camp for 3.5 months.

He managed to leave the camp with help from his solicitor, after sharing his experiences and the heavily negative impacts of the life there, on his physical and mental health, and I am grateful he agreed to share it with me, too.

Six people were sharing a very small bedroom, and there was absolutely no privacy.

Ali describes the food as run down and unhygienic, and shows as an example, photos of chicken that has feathers left on it. He tells me that he wasn't able to



eat anything from the camp for 21 days, as every time he would, he would become sick. He relied on shop-bought crisps and biscuits for those weeks. There was no access to a kitchen and when Ali asked the kitchen staff for some basic ingredients to make a sandwich, they refused, claiming he will eventually get used to the food there, and even told him that if he's not happy, he may return to where he came from. When Ali reported this to the camp office, he was told they are not responsible for the staff there, and that it's the home office responsibility. He called 'Migrant Help', and the complaint was meant to be passed to other relevant sources, but Ali heard nothing back.

The maintenance was poor with unreliable heating and hot water. He describes the camp as generally very cold, his bedroom being mostly reasonably warm, with sudden periods that heating would stop working, for a week or so, then be fixed, until it will stop working again. The same occurred with hot water. Ali tried asking for it to be fixed multiple times but it was never resolved within less than a week, meaning there were weeks of winter time, spent without heating and hot water.

Ali has been suffering from long term injuries from his past, that became worse during his time at Penally, due to the poor conditions and lack of support he received. Although Ali suffered from different medical problems, he only managed to go to the nurse twice throughout his time there which couldn't provide him with sufficient treatment.

This was despite various attempts to speak to a GP. For some reason he was told that he must pay for an urgent appointment, something he obviously, wasn't able to do, and that there was no option for a free non-urgent appointment.

Ali shares how the time in the camp has mentally impacted him "I kept thinking about the past". His time there has continually sent him back to his traumatic experiences. "I felt as I was in a prison".

He said he became aggressive, felt very low, depressed, scared, alone and when trying to reach out for mental support, he was told nothing can be done about that, and again his request for meeting a GP was refused.