



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Immigration Detention

Report of the Inquiry into Quasi-Detention

December 2021

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About the APPG Inquiry

In May 2020, the APPG on Immigration Detention launched an inquiry into the UK government's use of former UK military bases and Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) to house people seeking asylum. These have included Napier Barracks in Kent, which remains in use at the time of publication, Penally Camp in Wales, Tinsley House IRC near Gatwick Airport in West Sussex, and others.

Large-scale and institutional in nature, the sites replicate many of the features found in detained settings – including visible security measures, surveillance, shared living quarters, reduced levels of privacy and access to healthcare, legal advice and means of communication, and isolation from the wider community. In the APPG Inquiry Panel's view, they are most accurately described as 'quasi-detention'.

Serious concerns about the sites have been raised by a wide range of organisations, including independent inspectors, the High Court, parliamentarians, charities and residents themselves. The issues identified relate not just to how the government has been operating the sites, but also to the sites' fundamental suitability for the purpose of accommodating people seeking asylum – given the likely histories of torture, trafficking and/or other forms of serious trauma, and ongoing health and legal needs of such individuals.

The APPG Inquiry was led by a cross-party panel of 10 parliamentarians and was facilitated by the group's secretariat Medical Justice. The panel members were:

- Alison Thewliss MP (SNP) – Chair
- Paul Blomfield MP (Labour)
- Wendy Chamberlain MP (Liberal Democrat)
- Mary Foy MP (Labour)
- Richard Fuller MP (Conservative)
- Helen Hayes MP (Labour)
- Anne McLaughlin MP (SNP)
- Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP (Labour)
- Lord Roberts of Llandudno (Liberal Democrat)
- Baroness Lister of Burtersett (Labour)

The APPG Inquiry received 26 written evidence submissions and conducted three oral evidence sessions. Respondents included residents accommodated at the sites, medical and legal experts, charities working directly with residents, and on-site contractors.

Details of the APPG Inquiry's terms of reference and more information about the evidence received, including a list of witnesses at the oral evidence sessions, is available at Appendix 1.

For reasons of scope, the APPG Inquiry did not cover the use of hotels as asylum accommodation. However, the APPG Inquiry Panel notes that many of the concerns relating to the use of military bases and IRCs also apply to hotels and that people accommodated at them are facing many similar difficulties.

Readers may note that the report provides a more detailed discussion of the situation at Napier Barracks than at other sites. This reflects the fact that Napier is still in use and was therefore the focus of much of the evidence received by the APPG Inquiry. It does not indicate that conditions at the other sites were of any less concern.

All the evidence submitted to the APPG Inquiry, including the written submissions and videos and written transcripts of the oral evidence sessions, is available at:

<https://appgdetention.org.uk/inquiry-into-quasi-detention-evidence/>

The report is divided into various sections. Section 1 provides background information about the development and use of quasi-detention sites as asylum accommodation, including details of used/operational sites and halted sites. Section 2 details the evidence presented to the APPG Inquiry regarding Napier Barracks and Penally Camp, while Section 3 focuses on Tinsley House IRC. Finally, Section 4 lays out the conclusions and recommendations of the APPG Inquiry Panel following their consideration of the evidence.

Executive summary

Since spring 2020, the government has been developing and using two new types of sites to house people seeking asylum – former UK military bases and Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs). The sites have included Napier Barracks in Kent, which remains in use at the time of publication, Penally Camp in Wales, Tinsley House IRC near Gatwick Airport in West Sussex, and others.

The government has repeatedly stated that such sites are “safe”, “secure”, “coronavirus (Covid-19)-compliant” and “fit for purpose”.¹ The evidence gathered during this APPG Inquiry reveals an entirely different and extremely alarming situation. It shows how people accommodated at the sites – who have come to the UK seeking safety and sanctuary – have been subjected to appalling treatment and conditions. The experience has left many of them feeling dehumanised, exhausted and suffering a profound deterioration in their mental health, in some cases to the point of attempting suicide.

The APPG Inquiry received 26 written evidence submissions and conducted three oral evidence sessions. Respondents included residents accommodated at the sites, medical and legal experts, charities working directly with residents, and on-site contractors.

Much of the evidence collected showed how certain features inherent to the sites jeopardise the mental health and wider well-being of people seeking asylum, and make them fundamentally unsuitable for use as asylum accommodation. These include:

- The physical and social isolation induced by the sites making access to support and building links with the community more difficult
- Their military/prison-like nature, which for survivors of torture, trafficking or other serious forms of violence, as many asylum-seekers are, can be re-traumatising
- The prevalence of shared facilities, including dormitories, toilets and showers, and the associated lack of privacy and sleep deprivation
- The difficulty of disclosure of sensitive information in such settings, and the potential impacts of this on residents’ ability to access the asylum system, healthcare and other support
- The restriction and surveillance of residents’ movements, leaving them feeling trapped

¹ See for example: https://www.folkestone-hythe.gov.uk/media/3000/Contingency-Asylum-Accommodation-Ministry-of-Defence-Sites-Factsheet/pdf/Contingency_Asylum_Accommodation_Ministry_of_Defence_Sites_Factsheet.pdf?m=637381172008830000; <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-11-27/HL10837>; <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-03-16/debates/09EA88F1-6B46-4639-9C81-800466A4B908/IndependentChiefInspectorOfBordersAndImmigrationSiteVisits>; <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-06-11/14183>

- The way in which the sites become a target for individuals and groups, including members of the far-right, who hold racist and anti-migrant views, resulting in residents being harassed and abused
- The lack of Covid-19 safety

The evidence also identified many operational failings on the part of the Home Office and its contractors. These exacerbate the harmful effects of being accommodated at the sites, and include:

- Inadequate safeguarding, resulting in many vulnerable people being accommodated at the site, including unaccompanied age-disputed children; people who are self-harming, suicidal and/or have serious mental health conditions; and victims of torture, trafficking or other serious abuse
- Inadequate provision of on-site healthcare, including an absence of mental healthcare services despite high levels of mental health vulnerabilities amongst residents, and barriers impeding access to healthcare in the community
- Inadequate access to legal support, both in relation to asylum advice and public law advice
- Intimidation and mistreatment of residents by on-site staff
- Distressing transfers of residents to the sites
- Inadequate food and nutrition
- Poor communication with residents by Home Office
- Poor levels of cleanliness and repair
- Fire safety concerns

Testimonies from residents at Napier and Penally gathered during the APPG Inquiry made clear the disturbing impacts that the sites have had on people’s mental health in particular:

Oscar², resident at Napier – “I’m almost finished. The place is not good for me. It should be a good place, not this. I can’t sleep, there is so much noise at night. Everyone has their own problems, everyone is noisy, everyone is stressed, everyone is worried, everyone is tense. I sleep maybe 2-4 hours a night. I think about my life, I think about my wife and children. I think about why my life is so bad”.³

Victor⁴, resident at Napier – “When I arrived, the fear completely overwhelmed me. The design of the camp was oppressive, the high fences, the sheer numbers of people, the security who... looked like they were from the military. It was terrifying and I could feel it through my whole body. It reminded me of the military camps in [my home country]. I was in complete shock for the first few days. I did not sleep at all and I did not eat... I did not

² Name changed to protect individual’s identity

³ Oscar, [Oral evidence session 2 – Part 2](#)

⁴ Name changed to protect individual’s identity

speak to anyone. I was in shock. My body was in shock. It reminded me of [my home country] and I could not function”.⁵

A Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS UK) client, resident at Napier – “[It is] like being in a psychiatric hospital... there are people rapidly becoming more and more mentally unwell around you, one has just tried to kill himself, another is in pain, another is very stressed and cannot cope... I could not cope with it all the time. I did not feel like a person when I was there”.⁶

Kenan⁷, resident at Penally – “Living at that camp had a very negative impact on me. Before living at the camp, my mental health was fine. However, I quickly become depressed as a result of the conditions within the camp. I began to lose my hope that the situation would change. I felt abandoned and did not understand why I had been chosen to live in those dire conditions... It would be difficult to design a system that more perfectly delivers despair and deteriorating human health and mental capacity than these asylum camps”.⁸

In August this year, the government extended its use of Napier until at least 2025, and the Home Secretary confirmed that the site will “inform the final design” of the new asylum accommodation centres proposed in the Nationality and Borders Bill currently making its way through Parliament.⁹ A tender was also issued for the new accommodation centres which stated that they will house “up to c.8,000 service users”.¹⁰

These developments suggest it is the government’s intention to make large-scale, institutional, quasi-detention facilities – including the site at Napier and the new accommodation centres - into a permanent and widespread feature of the asylum accommodation system.

It is well-known that there is an urgent need for more asylum accommodation in the UK. But as this report shows, the use of quasi-detention facilities is not, and can never be, an effective or appropriate solution to this problem. The profound harm inflicted on people at Napier, Penally, Tinsley House IRC and other similar sites is clear from the evidence collected. It cannot be allowed to continue, let alone to be expanded.

In light of this, the APPG Inquiry Panel makes the recommendations to the government laid out below.

⁵ Victor, [Oral evidence session 2 – Part 2](#)

⁶ [Jesuit Refugee Service UK \(JRS UK\)](#)

⁷ Surname removed to protect individual’s identity

⁸ Kenan, [Oral evidence session 2 – Part 1](#)

⁹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/7159/documents/75641/default/>

¹⁰ <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/200ecd04-fc0d-4622-8aeb-ab8f9c126780>

Recommendations:

- 1) In relation to current or former quasi-detention sites, the government must ensure:
 - a) Napier Barracks is closed as asylum accommodation with immediate and permanent effect, and that people seeking asylum accommodated at Napier are moved directly to decent, safe housing in the community that allows them to live with dignity
 - b) Penally Camp remains closed as asylum accommodation and is not used for that purpose at any point in the future
 - c) Tinsley House IRC remains closed as asylum accommodation and neither it nor any other IRC is used for that purpose at any point in the future
 - d) No other sites of a military nature or adjacent to IRCs, including those at Barton Stacey and Yarl's Wood, are opened as asylum accommodation

- 2) In relation to asylum system more widely, the government must ensure:
 - a) People seeking asylum are housed in decent, safe accommodation in the community that supports their well-being and recovery from trauma, facilitates their engagement with the asylum process, and allows them to build links with their community
 - b) Key elements of the asylum process, including the substantive interview, are conducted promptly and in an environment that allows disclosure of sensitive information and access to legal and other necessary support

- 3) The APPG Inquiry Panel is strongly opposed to the introduction of 'accommodation centres' to house people seeking asylum, as proposed in the Nationality and Borders Bill. In the event that accommodation centres are introduced, however, the government must ensure:
 - a) None of the shortcomings identified in this report are replicated at the new centre(s)
 - b) No centre is opened without the consent of the local authority and meaningful consultation with all relevant stakeholders
 - c) Effective safeguards are in place such that no vulnerable people are accommodated at the centre(s)
 - d) Residents are assured a safe environment that meets a minimum standard of decency,¹¹ including protection from harassment and abuse
 - e) Residents are assured unimpeded access to healthcare, including mental healthcare
 - f) Residents are assured unimpeded access to legal advice and support, and access to an effective appeals process to challenge their placement in the centre
 - e) Residents are accommodated at the centre(s) for the minimum possible time
 - f) Robust and effective mechanisms are in place to monitor the performance of any private contractors

¹¹ An example of what a minimum standard of decency might look like is the Scottish Housing Quality Standard: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/social-housing/improving-standards/>

g) An independent statutory inspection regime is in place.