



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Immigration Detention

Meeting on Napier Barracks and accommodation centres

8 February 2022, 10.30 - 12.00

Online via Zoom

Minutes

- Parliamentarians:** Alison Thewliss MP (SNP) - Chair
Paul Blomfield MP (Labour)
Baroness Lister of Burtersett (Labour)
Baroness Ludford (Liberal Democrat)
Stuart C. McDonald MP (SNP)
Anne McLaughlin MP (SNP)
Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP (Labour)
Lord Roberts of Llandudno (Liberal Democrat)
- APPG Secretariat:** Elspeth Macdonald (Medical Justice)
- External speakers:** Erfan – former resident at Napier Barracks
Kenan – former resident at Penally Camp
Naomi Blackwell – Detention Outreach Manager, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) UK
Maddie Harris – Director and Founder, Humans for Rights Network
- Other participants:** Over 55 additional attendees, including experts by experience, parliamentary staff, and representatives from NGOs, law firms, inspectorates, funding bodies and the media
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1. Welcome

1.1 The chair welcomed all participants to the meeting.

2. Barracks sites and accommodation centres - views from experts-by-experience

Erfan, former resident at Napier

2.1 Having been granted refugee status the previous week, Erfan now had a hopeful and optimistic future in the UK. But Napier had affected him both in the short- and long-term. The

difficult memories of it would always remain. He used to consider himself completely healthy, both physically and mentally. But after being at Napier he was now suffering from insomnia.

2.2 Napier looked like a prison. It was surrounded by a high fence, and had dormitories containing up to 14 people. Residents were always watched by security guards, and all activities were scheduled. The site was also run down and filthy.

2.3 Today marked one year since Erfan's transfer out of Napier. Residents were called by numbers at the site; on the day of his transfer out, a staff member had come to his sleeping block and shouted his number. It was difficult to express his relief at leaving. It had felt like he was being made a free man, like he was being released from a detention centre.

2.4 Once back in a hotel room in London, it was a huge relief to regain privacy and dignity again, to have clean sheets and one's own bathroom. These were things all human beings should have.

2.5 But Napier was still open and the government wanted to expand this type of accommodation, despite all the evidence showing how badly it affected people. This was a political decision, an attempt to dissuade people from coming to the UK.

2.6 The people coming were fleeing persecution and danger; it was not right to put vulnerable individuals like that into hostile accommodation that damaged their well-being. Politicians must change their mind. Like him, many of the people housed at the sites would eventually be granted asylum and join UK society; but they would always remember what had happened to them in the asylum system.

Kenan, former resident at Penally

2.7 Kenan was sent to Penally in September 2020. The Home Office was using such sites to create conflict between asylum seekers and local communities. It also sent a violent message to people wanting to come to the UK about how they would be treated here.

2.8 Most people at Penally did not have solicitors, and internet access and phone reception at the site was poor. It was difficult to reach help.

2.9 Kenan could not forget the situation that the Home Office had put him and others in. He had managed to get out, and he and others had managed to campaign to close Penally. But the memories of it would stay with him.

2.10 Many of the people at Penally were vulnerable, for example victims of trafficking. By sending them there, the Home Office added to the trauma these people had experienced, reduced their ability to function and made them reliant on healthcare and welfare systems.

2.11 The Home Office's plans for accommodation centres were not public. Information from sub-contractor staff working at asylum hotels suggested that the Home Office wanted to stop using hotels and dispersal asylum accommodation, and instead use the centres.

2.12 It was vital to campaign against such accommodation. People should not compromise - they should demand that Napier be closed, and call Napier and the accommodation centres what they were ie. detention centres. It was important to highlight in the media how badly people were being treated - they were vulnerable and seeking sanctuary in the UK, but were just being dumped in Napier, cut off from help.

3. Report of inquiry into quasi-detention - key findings / update on accommodation centres

Elsbeth Macdonald, APPG Secretariat

3.1 Elsbeth gave a summary of the report findings and recommendations, accessible in full at <https://appgdetention.org.uk/inquiry-into-quasi-detention/>

3.2 Napier was acting as a pilot for the government's proposed asylum accommodation centres. What was happening in Napier gave an indication of what to expect from the centres. The government had extended its use of Napier until at least 2026.

3.3 The legal framework already existed to open the accommodation centres. No public tender to build/operate the sites had been published yet; however a [Prior Information Notice](#) in August 2021 indicated the centres could house up to 8,000 people, and that there would be on-site processing of asylum claims. The government had said it did not plan to house vulnerable people at the sites, but it had refused to guarantee this in legislation. It had also refused to rule out housing children at the sites.

4. Update on situation at Napier Barracks

Maddie Harris, Humans for Rights Network (HFRN)

4.1 HFRN had been supporting residents at Napier since October 2020. Lack of privacy was a serious problem at the site. It affected people's ability to sleep, and to communicate with friends, family, lawyers and other avenues support. There was little space for people to have important, private conversations. Residents often spoke to HFRN representatives while walking in the park for example.

4.2 Residents had little information about the asylum process and lacked access to legal advice. Asylum substantive interviews had been conducted at the site since April 2021. Some residents had done their interviews without any legal advice. Currently it seemed only small numbers of residents were getting their asylum substantive interviews at the site. The rest received very little information about what would happen to them - Notices of Intent under the inadmissibility process were not being issued for example. This lack of information meant

people were staying at the site, even when it was negatively affecting their health, in the hope that they might eventually receive an interview.

4.3 HFRN was still regularly meeting residents at Napier who were vulnerable, including victims of torture and trafficking. It was clear the Home Office had done nothing to improve its processes to detect vulnerability.

Naomi Blackwell, JRS UK

4.4 JRS UK had been supporting residents at Napier, including by going on-site, continuously since October 2020. Any impression that the site had improved since the High Court ruling in June 2021 was incorrect. It was still damaging residents housed there.

4.5 JRS UK was also providing residents with support after they left Napier. Through this, the organisation was seeing how the damage done to people at the site was long-lasting.

4.6 Napier was an army camp, and nothing could be done to change this. It was a very controlled environment, with constant pressure of security. Even when JRS UK staff went on site, they were on occasion followed by security guards. The guard's presence impacted on how much residents felt able to disclose to JRS UK, and made everyone feel oppressed, watched and controlled.

4.7 It was important to call the site what it was - detention. Residents often did not feel able to leave their rooms or the site; they effectively self-detained. NGOs' access to the site was also controlled. In January, JRS UK, HFRN, Samphire and another volunteer had requested access to the site to distribute 300 donated coats. The Home Office initially granted access, but then withdrew the access the day before the distribution was due to take place. The reasons for this were still not clear. The previous week Samphire had also had problems with access to distribute mobile phones to residents.

4.8 JRS UK had asked many residents to contribute to today's APPG meeting, but most were too fearful that doing so would negatively affect their asylum claim. One former resident had said he could not even think about Napier anymore because it made him physically sick. Another had explained that the memory of Napier would never fade, and that he would never forget how he had been treated there.

4.9 JRS UK routinely came across victims of torture and trafficking at the site. Residents were already isolated - from their partners, children and family. This weighed very heavily on them. At Napier, they were then isolated further from the community. Residents constantly told JRS UK that they felt degraded and ghettoised at the site. On top of this they were chronically sleep deprived.

4.10 All these layers combined to cause residents' mental health to deteriorate at the site, and to make them feel dehumanised. Accommodation centres would be exactly the same. One resident had told JRS UK two weeks before that no matter how well you were when you arrived

at Napier, your mental health would decline there and it would leave you unwell. Another resident told JRS UK that he felt he was not a person while at the site, and that he was kept “behind society” until he left.

4.11 What is it about asylum seekers that caused the government to exceed their powers in a way that would be totally unacceptable in any other area of our lives? Perhaps the answer was obvious (this was a rough quote from a QC in the recent [phone seizures judicial review case](#)).

5. APPG visit to Napier Barracks: Anne McLaughlin MP, Stuart C. McDonald MP; Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP; Alison Thewliss MP

Anne McLaughlin MP

5.1 Visiting the site was worse than expected in some ways, because you imagined yourself having to live in that environment. Home Office officials noted several times how positive it was to see residents chatting and laughing together; they did not appear to appreciate that people could behave in this way even when very depressed.

5.3 The dormitories were one of the worst aspects. One resident was on a video call with a child when the group entered. This was a reminder of how much people at the site had lost - their family, their children, the things people need to keep themselves sane - and also how little privacy people had.

Stuart C. McDonald MP

5.4 The site was bleak, cold and prison-like. There seemed little point in housing people there except to add to the ‘deterrence agenda’. It was dry on the day of the visit; when it rained it must be even worse, since residents would have to stay cooped up in their room dormitories.

5.5 The sleeping accommodation was outrageous - up to 14 people in a dormitory, separated by thin sheets which were not fully opaque.

5.6 Residents had no autonomy - they could not decide what to do with their day. There was no privacy, or sense of home or community. All residents could do was to exist, survive, wait.

5.7 The few activities available on-site for residents - including football, basketball and a gym - were entirely inadequate to meet the needs of over 300 residents. The Home Office was relying on external charities to come on-site and deliver some of the better ones. Yet there were also issues with charities’ obtaining access to the site.

5.8 Little seemed to be being done to proactively identify residents who were vulnerable or in need of support. They had to seek out support for themselves.

5.9 It was not clear how much experience staff had working with asylum seekers or vulnerable groups. None of the staff that the group spoke to mentioned having any experience. This was a concern.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP

5.10 What was the point of the site? People were moved to it from hotels, and then moved on from it to dispersal accommodation. Its real purpose seemed to be about creating as hostile an environment as possible, and making a profit. In pursuit of this, contractors appeared to be spending as little as possible on residents' welfare.

Alison Thewliss MP

5.11 Staff and charities at the site were working under difficult circumstances. Charities like Napier Friends, HFRN and JRS UK were doing their best to support people. However, the site was cold, dilapidated and facilities were entirely inadequate for the 300 plus residents who were there on the day of the visit.

5.12 The few activities for residents seemed brief and scheduled e.g. slots to watch TV, a set day each week to wash clothes, and set meal times.

5.13 Despite being open since 2020, the site was still extremely dilapidated - with plaster and paint peeling off walls, leaks, and overflows running. The lack of private space was very stark, particularly in the dormitories. The sleeping spaces were cramped.

5.14 It was hugely depressing that the government considered this adequate accommodation. It appeared to be a means of deterrence, rather than of supporting traumatised people.

5.15 The group was closely observed whilst moving around the site, including by security guards.

5.16 The APPG would continue to work on the issue. A report from the visit would be issued in due course.

6. Q & A

6.1 **Baroness Lister of Burtersett** - would it be possible to have the visit report before Report Stage of the Nationality and Borders Bill in the Lords? Peers would also welcome input on what the priorities should be for amendments relating to accommodation centres. Report Stage would likely begin in the week of 28 February.

6.2 **John Speyer, Hear Me Out (HMO)** - HMO provided music activities in detention centres. HMO had been planning with Migrant Help to offer a music programme at Napier. This had been turned down by the Home Office, who seemed to be of the view that there was

already a full activity programme. This did not seem to be the case. Could the APPG assist with getting this reconsidered?

6.3 **Sheila Moseley, Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network** - Did anyone have views on the adequacy of the support offered by Migrant Help at the site?

6.4 **Alison Thewliss MP** - the group had met Migrant Help staff on-site, but it was difficult to say how effective the support they were offering to residents was.

6.5 **Maddie Harris, HFRN** - HFRN and other charities were having to fill gaps in services that Migrant Help were contracted to provide. The support, information and advice that Migrant Help was providing was not adequate.

6.6 **Elsbeth Macdonald, APPG Secretariat** - the Home Office had said that people who requested transfers off the site due to vulnerability were being sent back to hotels. In contrast, people who stayed at the site for their allotted time would be moved to dispersal accommodation. This put pressure on residents to stay at the site, even if they were unwell, in order to avoid being sent back to a hotel.

6.7 **Dr Jane Hunt, Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF)** - Did the MPs talk to anyone about healthcare provision at the site and whether staff were trained in refugee health issues?

6.8 **Alison Thewliss MP** - The group spoke to the on-site nurse. He was working in difficult circumstances. It was hard to see how he could meet the diverse needs of over 300 residents.

6.9 **Dr Jill O'Leary, Helen Bamber Foundation** - as far as HBF knew, the on-site nurse was not specifically trained in the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. Did the nurse speak about the relationship and communication with neighbouring NHS GP practices and how residents could access GP appointments?

6.10 **Alison Thewliss MP** - Time did not allow for in-depth discussions during the visit, and the constant presence of Home Office officials made free and frank conversations with other staff difficult. However, it seemed that residents had to make GP appointments via the on-site nurse. It was not clear how often or easily they did this. A sign had stated the nurse's working days were Mon-Thurs only. Alison had asked about what would happen if a resident was taken outside the nurse's days/hours. The response had been that they would need to call 101.

6.11 **Naomi Blackwell, JRS UK** - All residents were purportedly registered with one local GP practice. However JRS UK had not met any residents who had managed to see a GP. Residents might not feel comfortable to disclose their health concerns to the nurse, since they would then repeatedly see the nurse at the site. One resident JRS UK had supported had an issue he did not want to disclose to the nurse. Both JRS UK and his solicitor had asked if the resident could make an appointment directly with the GP, but the nurse said this was not possible. This was an example of how residents at the site were being prevented from

disclosing very serious issues. The same problems were seen with healthcare in immigration detention.

6.12 **Kenan, former resident at Penally** - which charities were allowed to visit Napier? Why were some charities denied access? At Penally, residents had completed vulnerability assessments with HBF. Was it possible to do something similar at Napier?

6.13 **Clare Jennings, Matthew Gold & Co. Solicitors** - Clare had represented many residents in the first and second groups at Napier. Residents were automatically registered at the local GP practice (the Whitehouse Clinic) but most of Clare's clients did not realise that they had been registered: they had received a letter in English about it which they did not understand. Residents had to request GP appointments via the on-site nurse. Clare only saw one resident who managed to get an appointment, but the process did not work well: he was not given a specific date/time for his phone appointment; the GP just called him at a random time and the resident missed the call. After a week or so, the resident followed up with the nurse; the nurse then had to ask the GP to call him again.

6.14 **Erfan, former resident at Napier** - during his time at Napier, staff carried out welfare checks on residents. However, the staff were not trained to deal with vulnerable people; most were actually students, working on their student visas. They were not social workers or psychologists. There was also no translation; Erfan had had to provide translation in some cases. There was no consent or data protection, and no-one who could offer residents professional support. The nurse at the site was completely inadequate and not able to meet residents' physical and mental health needs.

6.15 **Ceri Lloyd-Hughes, DPG Law** - how were safeguarding processes working at the site? Were referrals being responded to in a timely manner?

6.16 **Elsbeth Macdonald, APPG Secretariat** - the nurse told the group he had encountered a victim of trafficking at the site recently. So, safeguarding had not worked well in that case.

7. **APPG proposed actions / other updates**

Elsbeth Macdonald, APPG Secretariat

7.1 In addition to producing a visit report, the APPG also planned to write to Home Secretary to raise various concerns. The Home Office had suggested that a second visit to Napier might be possible, so the APPG would follow up on that.

8. **Thanks and close**