

# An inspection of the use of contingency asylum accommodation – key findings from site visits to Penally Camp and Napier Barracks

News story

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[HMIP](#) is producing a detailed written report, which the Independent Chief Inspector will append to ICIBI's full inspection report on completion of this inspection. As well as Penally Camp and Napier Barracks, ICIBI's report will cover hotels and any other forms of contingency asylum accommodation. ICIBI's report and recommendations will be submitted to the Home Secretary and published in the usual way. Meanwhile, the points below, which have been shared with the Home Office, provide a high-level overview of what inspectors found during their site visits. The headings are those typically used by HMIP.

ICIBI's inspection of contingency asylum accommodation is ongoing and inspectors are continuing to gather, analyse and test written and oral evidence from the Home Office, the contracted third parties, national and local stakeholders, and asylum seekers who are or have been in contingency accommodation. While the public 'call for evidence' has closed, ICIBI is still keen to receive evidence, including the latest information, about contingency asylum accommodation in general and about specific sites, including Penally Camp and Napier Barracks.

## Leadership and management

- Opening Penally Camp and Napier Barracks as contingency asylum accommodation, particularly doing so safely during a pandemic, presented substantial logistical and other challenges. Despite this, the Home Office gave its accommodation contractors less than two weeks to make each site operational.
- Local stakeholders who needed to set up essential services for residents, such as healthcare, were not consulted in advance of the Home Office taking the decision to proceed. They were given insufficient time to prepare before the first asylum seekers arrived and there seems to have been little understanding or regard on the Home Office's part of what impact this would have at the local level.
- In September/October 2020, Public Health England had advised the Home Office that opening multi-occupancy dormitory-style accommodation at Napier was not supported by current guidance, and both they and Public Health Wales expressed concerns about the COVID-safety of the accommodation. Both sites were opened before Public Health Wales and Public Health England recommendations had been actioned.
- Public Health England further advised that if the accommodation was to be used, the ability to isolate positive cases and/or establish effective cohorting arrangements was essential to containing any COVID-19 outbreak. Given the cramped communal conditions and unworkable cohorting at Napier, once one person was infected a large-scale outbreak was virtually inevitable. In our resident survey at Napier, none of those who responded felt they had been kept safe from COVID-19. At Penally, where overall numbers were lower and cohorts smaller, the vast majority still did not feel they were being kept safe from the risk of infection.
- The Crown Premises Fire Safety Inspectorate (CPFSI) informed us of serious concerns about fire safety at Napier that had not been fully addressed at the time of the ICIBI/HMIP inspection visit. The work recommended by CPFSI at Penally had been largely completed.
- While COVID-19 restrictions had meant that some asylum seekers had been accommodated at Penally Camp and Napier Barracks for much longer than had been originally envisaged, the Home Office had been slow to recognise the impact on residents of prolonged isolation in accommodation that was not designed or intended for long-term stays.
- The resources, skills and assurance systems required to support long-term communal accommodation were inadequate at both sites:
  - On-site management structures were unclear, partly because of the multiple sub-contractors and partly because of inadequate oversight by the contracting companies.
  - Managers at both sites lacked the experience and skills to run large-scale communal accommodation.
  - The Home Office did not exercise adequate oversight at either site and Home Office staff were rarely present. There were fundamental failures of leadership and planning by the Home Office.

## Safety

- We met many men who described feeling depressed and hopeless at their circumstances. In our resident survey, all of those who responded at Napier and the vast majority at Penally said they had felt depressed at some points. At both sites about a third of respondents said they had mental health problems; about a third of respondents at Napier said they had felt suicidal.
- We had serious safeguarding concerns in relation to Napier. There was inadequate support for people who had self-harmed. People at high risk of self-harm were located in a decrepit 'isolation block' which we considered unfit for habitation. Residents who may have been children were also housed in the same block pending an age assessment; in one case we were told that this had been for up to two weeks.
- Residents at both sites were normally able to come and go. The exception was during the major COVID-19 outbreak at Napier, when over a hundred people were confined to their billets for approximately four weeks and unable to go outside except to use the mobile toilets or showers. They were warned that they might be arrested if they left the camp. In at least one case, a resident was forcibly returned to the camp by the police.
- At both sites, residents described feeling trapped in poor conditions and feared that if they moved out they would jeopardise their only source of support and possibly their asylum cases.
- Residents at both camps, especially Napier, told us they had been shouted at and intimidated by protestors and members of the public who did not want them there and that this was another reason they did not want to leave the camp. While Napier was close to a town (Folkestone), Penally Camp was isolated and the nearest town (Tenby) was a long walk.

## Respect

- The environment at both sites, especially Napier, was impoverished, run-down and unsuitable for long-term accommodation.
- Cleanliness at both sites was variable at best and cleaning was made difficult by the age of the buildings. Some areas were filthy.
- The accommodation contractor had made efforts to improve the facilities (for example, installing mobile shower and toilet units), and at the beginning of March 2021 work was in hand at Napier to reconfigure the interior of some blocks into smaller living units. However, the age and general condition of the buildings made the costs of more substantial refurbishment prohibitive given the uncertainty over how long they would be required as asylum accommodation.
- At Napier, the number of residents had reduced from almost 400 in mid-January 2021 to 62 in mid-February. Since December 2020, the number at Penally had reduced to c.80, having been double this at its height. The multi-occupancy billets at both sites were cramped, which made effective social distancing difficult, and inspectors heard that this had been impossible before the numbers were reduced.
- Most current residents had been in Penally or Napier for several months. They did not know how much longer they would be in the camp and this was

a major cause of distress. They had been told initially that they would be there for a few weeks. Over the months, they had been told various things about their stay and about moving on and now did not trust anything they heard. Residents told inspectors they did not understand why they were still in the camp while others had been moved out, and some believed (mistakenly) that it was in some way connected to the Home Office's view of the strength of their asylum claim, and the fact they had been in Penally or Napier would count against them.

- Most residents were awaiting a substantive asylum interview but did not have a date for this. Home Office communication with them was poor. It had only recently commenced video meetings with residents. These meetings did not provide information about individual asylum claims, which was what concerned residents most. The dearth of official information gave rise to misunderstandings and rumours, which had a negative effect on individuals and the collective mood.
- Managers did not systematically survey or consult residents.
- Most residents we spoke to said that onsite security and services staff were friendly and treated them with respect.
- All residents had a mobile phone throughout their stay and could access the internet, although WIFI at Penally had been poor until recently. They had little to do to fill their time, a lack of privacy, a lack of control over their day-to-day lives, and limited information about what would happen to them. These factors had had a corrosive effect on residents' morale and mental health.
- While there were some restrictions regarding access to the sites, mostly COVID-related, local voluntary groups were supporting residents at both camps, including with clothing and other necessities, by organising activities and signposting and facilitating access to legal representatives. Meanwhile, to supplement its contracted telephone helpline service, Migrant Help had arranged to have someone onsite at both sites.

## **Preparation for leaving the accommodation**

- Most residents had been in hotel accommodation before being moved to either Penally or Napier. Typically, they received little notice (a matter of hours) of the plan to move them to one of the camps and no explanation of why. The same was true of moving them from Penally or Napier. Most were moved back to a hotel. At the beginning of March 2021, Napier residents were informed that they would all be relocated by 2 April. They were not told to where. Most did not believe it would happen and feared that if there were new arrivals before they left they could again become trapped by a new COVID-19 outbreak.
- There was little focus on helping residents to prepare for next steps, but the visiting agencies and charities provided useful practical support for those who were moving on.

Penally Camp Images

Napier Barracks Images

- [Napier Barracks. 17 February 2021.](#) (JPEG, 2.58MB)

- [Living accommodation at Napier Barracks. 17 February 2021.](#) (JPEG, 1.41MB)
- [Living/sleeping area, Napier Barracks. 17 February 2021.](#) (JPEG, 1.79MB)
- [Living/sleeping area \(photo 2\), Napier Barracks. 17 February 2021.](#) (JPEG, 2.21MB)
- [Isolation room, Napier Barracks. 17 February 2021](#) (JPEG, 1.42MB)
- [Isolation room \(photo 2\), Napier Barracks. 17 February 2021.](#) (JPEG, 1.55MB)

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