

Military Barracks as Asylum Accommodation – Napier Barracks

Introduction

Humans for Rights Network is a human rights monitoring organisation. We provide opportunities for asylum seekers, migrants and refugees to bear witness to the treatment they have experienced. Our work has in recent years predominantly been focused on the humanitarian situations of France and Greece, however since the beginning of the pandemic we have shifted our intention to documenting the use of barracks and hotel accommodation and the harm that these accommodations are doing to asylum seekers accommodated within them. We conduct interviews in order to gather firsthand testimony, collate photographic and video evidence of situations and assess for action needed.

The report below has been developed using a combination of firsthand testimony given by those accommodated in Napier barracks and our own direct experience of these conversations. It also includes information that relates to engagement with other stakeholders.

Background

In September 2020, the Home Office announced the use of two de-commissioned MOD sites for use as ‘contingency accommodation’ for approximately 700 asylum seekers. These sites, in Folkestone and Tenby respectively, are said to have been acquired in order to meet the increased need for housing for asylum seekers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We have been told that use of MOD sites to accommodate seemingly arbitrarily selected individuals, is experienced by those ‘selected’ as ‘making an example of them’. The use of these sites demonstrates a clear disregard for the mental and physical well-being of those held there as we set out below.

The evidence included here relates specifically to Napier barracks, Folkestone, and any specific incidents outlined here are in relation to conversations that took place with residents of Napier barracks. However, the key points we raise are also related to Penally camp, and we suggest should also be used in demonstrating the possible harm that will be done to asylum seekers should the Home Office proceed with its plans to introduce additional sites such as Yarl's Wood and Barton Stacey.

Summary

- We have witnessed a rapid deterioration of the wellbeing of those we remain in contact with at Napier barracks. No support has been offered to residents in alleviating the effects of the barracks on their wellbeing other than widespread prescription of sleeping tablets and antidepressant medication.
- There continues to be a lack of response to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak at Napier barracks, by the accommodation management, demonstrated by a consistent lack of action taken to prevent further transmission of the virus to those who remain in the camp.

- No effort made by Clearsprings Readyhomes to communicate information about the COVID-19 outbreak and associated decisions, to the residents of Napier barracks in appropriate languages or in a culturally safe way resulting in distress and confusion.
- The provision of blankets and drinking water made by an NGO after the fire of 29/01/21 demonstrates again that inadequacy of the barracks accommodation and the services provided by Clearsprings Readyhomes.
- We are consistently identifying individuals with specific vulnerabilities such as victims of trafficking and modern slavery. This demonstrates that no steps were taken by the Home Office to ensure that the most vulnerable asylum seekers were not accommodated in a way so as to cause harm and claims that the most vulnerable have been moved from the accommodation are false.

General conditions

General conditions of accommodation in Napier barracks have been widely covered¹. However, since the fire on the 29/01/21 these have further deteriorated.

- Rooms shared by 14+ people with some now being forced to share beds due to the damage caused by the fire to dormitories.
- Electricity within the dormitories is intermittent, and not always available
- Drinking water is now provided by an emergency purchase of 5000 bottles of water by the accommodation provider (02/02/21)
- Heating and hot water are not believed to have been restored in all dormitories
- Bedding and clothing have not been washed for over 2 weeks
- Cleaning is inconsistent if not totally absent
- Toilets and showers remaining broken and filthy.
- There has been no onsite medical care despite there being over 120 individuals who are positive for COVID-19

COVID-19 security and health

In September 2020, when the first asylum seekers arrived at Napier barracks, many without any idea of their intended destination, and others with only hours notice, it is our understanding that no tests were carried out with individuals moved from hotels or other accommodations from various local authority areas to Napier barracks. We were also informed by residents that no isolation was required or facilitated upon arrival at the barracks.

The evidence we have gathered suggests that the barracks are not COVID-19 compliant and that no steps have been taken since its opening to mitigate the risk of an outbreak.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/31/asylum-seekers-dire-conditions-kent-napier-barracks-fire>

In an interview conducted in November 2020, we were told by one individual that someone had tested positive for COVID-19 in his dormitory, and that the entire dormitory was quarantined. In order to quarantine the dormitory, he told us that the security and all of the management 'came in like an invasion' but did not tell them that there was a confirmed case in the dormitory. He told us that despite repeated requests, the cleaning company refused to clean the dormitory including the area where the individual slept, or the communal areas such as the toilets and showers. They then asked the accommodation management to clean their dormitory and this was refused as it was 'not their job' to clean. After 2 days, testing of those quarantined in the dormitory began, but only for those who were accommodated in the half of the dormitory housing an additional 14 people, accessed through a corridor containing the 2 toilets and showers used by individuals on both sides (28+ people).

During a conversation with a resident of Napier barracks on the 16th January we were informed that there were in excess of 15 cases of COVID-19 in Napier barracks and that no effort was being made by staff to support those who had tested positive to isolate. Our contact told us "These infected people are inside every room inside the restaurant, inside the rooms where we sleep, we can get infected anywhere".

In conversations with Clearsprings Ready Homes, we were informed that an outbreak is considered to be 2 cases. When there are 2 cases in an accommodation, those who have tested positive are transferred to an isolation hotel near Heathrow in London. In a later conversation we were told that when there are 2 cases, the hotel would be closed to deep clean and those who are positive are transferred to the isolation hotel with the others re-accommodated. In a further conversation we were told that 2 cases in an accommodation would result in a total 'lockdown' of the accommodation with no access in or out.

There is a clear inconsistency in Clearsprings Ready Homes' approach when managing an outbreak, and in further testimony taken from a resident of Napier the lack of action taken to control the outbreak in Napier is clear, "Yesterday, we asked the camp staff to put these 15 people into isolation, they did not take any action. We asked the manager to put these people into isolation, he didn't take any action. The manager is not cooperating with us. He said he will leave these people to do whatever they like."

Days later we were informed by residents that over 120 of the 380+ residents had now tested positive. We continue to consistently hear reports from residents that there is no provision to allow those who have tested positive to isolate from those who have not, with the sharing of dormitories, toilets and showers continuing. Furthermore, we have also been told that individuals are being forced to share beds and blankets after the fire on 29/01/21 rendered at least one of the dormitories out of use.

We have also been told that any communication regarding any ongoing testing and any restrictions in place or to be introduced continues to be only communicated to residents in English. We have been unable to obtain information regarding the testing regime but are aware that the most recent positive test was returned on Saturday 30th January and therefore the site will remain 'locked down' for a further 10 days, to be extended again should there be a further positive test. Whilst of course steps

must be taken to ensure that the COVID-19 outbreak in the barracks does not spread further, the continuous detainment of asylum seekers, without adequate social distancing measures continues to affect their mental and physical wellbeing.

Lack of vulnerability assessments and equalities act

Napier barracks is felt by many residents to be unsafe and poses a risk to the wellbeing of those accommodated there, not least those who have survived torture, trafficking, modern slavery and war. The Home Office has itself² stated that MOD sites are not appropriate accommodation for these individuals, and claims to be 'screening' to ensure that anyone who has endured trafficking, torture or modern slavery is not transferred to the barracks.

As an organisation we have met with many people who have told us that they are survivors of one or a number of these experiences and that being accommodated in the barracks is triggering for them, is affecting their sleep and that they are depressed. In an interview in November 2020, we were told;

"this place, the barracks reminds me of torture I faced back home. This was a very bad experience for me. It reminds me of a camp. I have bad memories; it is like a camp in other places. It is like a prison it is inhumane"

This echoes much of the testimony we have received from residents. Further to this, on the 3rd February 2021, we spoke for the first time to three individuals who are potential victims of trafficking.

Mental health and wellbeing

In every interview conducted in November 2020 we heard from residents that they were experiencing issues such as inability to sleep, depression and that they feel unsafe. One individual told us "There is no privacy. It is unpleasant to be here. Seeing people trying to take their own lives. Police and ambulances coming all the time are reminding me of the war. Seeing the blood, and the difficulties that we are facing reminds me of the treatment and war that I experienced, I don't feel safe, I don't feel mentally stable."

We have heard many descriptions of self-harm and an appalling response from a member of Clearsprings Staff, when an individual was repeatedly banging his head against a wall and his friend was told by a security guard that he was attention seeking.

On Friday 15th January 2021, we were told that 22 people had until very recently, been held in a building inside the barracks on suicide watch by a security guard and had been unable to leave. We spoke to a resident on Saturday 16th January 2021, who told us that he was one of the 22 people held in this way. He said "There are a group of people who are suffering with acute mental health problems.

² Page 3 'Contingency asylum accommodation, Ministry of Defence sites Factsheet', October 2020

Before, they put us inside a room and did not let us get out. Now they give us sleeping tablets that make us sleep all day.”

Many of these individuals are still in the barracks, and to our knowledge have not received any support regarding their health and wellbeing. Since the events of the fire on the 29th January, each individual we have spoken to has said that their mental health is worse than it was before, and the events surrounding the fire are reminding them of what they have fled.

Staff behaviour and threats

In every interview conducted with residents of Napier barracks, we have consistently been told of threats made to residents by security at the camp.³

People are living in fear of speaking out about the conditions in Napier barracks, as they have been told Clearsprings staff that it will affect their asylum claim and we believe that this is preventing certain vulnerable individuals such as potential victims of trafficking from accessing the support they need to be transferred from the barracks.

Residents have been told by the management of the accommodation that Clearsprings will inform the Home Office that they are a ‘troublemaker’ if they complain, for example about the food, and that it will affect their asylum claim. The people we have spoken to have expressed concerns about their identity being shared and we have taken all our statements anonymously, as people have told us they are worried that talking to us about the treatment they may receive if the Home office or Clearsprings find out that they have discussed how they are being treated. For example, one man told us, ‘If you request something that you believe is your right, they threaten you and say we will tell the Home Office, and it will affect your claim.’ No members of the accommodation management team or associated contractors should make any reference to the asylum claims of individuals in the accommodations they manage.

We are concerned that the suitability of the staff tasked with the day to day management of Napier barracks, and other initial accommodations, has not been fully considered. And, that the Home Office does not have a robust procedure in place to ensure its contractors are in adherence with their contractual obligation, such as the training expected to be provided to all staff. Furthermore, as per Home Office guidance asylum seekers are directed to the Migrant Help 24hr advice line in order to raise concerns and issues. However, this does not provide sufficient remedy as we have heard from many asylum seekers in both Napier barracks and various hotel accommodations that they have had to wait for up to 6 hours when attempting to call Migrant help, with some not succeeding in making contact at all.

Information and Isolation - delays in processing of asylum claims

³<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/23/uk-asylum-seekers-told-claims-at-risk-if-they-misbehave>

Many individuals in Napier barracks have been in the UK for many months, waiting far longer than the intended 6 months for their cases to be heard and resolved, and with no meaningful contact from the Home Office regarding the progress of their claims. We have spoken to individuals who have been in Napier barracks for 4 months, plus hotel accommodation for 5+ months previously with no progress made in processing their claim. These long delays, whilst being accommodated in conditions which in our opinion constitute a breach of Article 3 ECHR, continues to cause a further deterioration to the wellbeing of those currently held there due to a total lack of information, and persistent delays.

It is our opinion that there is an urgent need to evacuate the barracks, providing safe, secure, COVID compliant accommodation for all asylum seekers and for particular focus to be given to the delay to the consideration of their asylum claims.