



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Penally Update

This situation continues to develop, so I hope the following addresses some of the questions I have received.

Timeline

A number of people have asked when we first became aware of this. I first became aware of this issue on Saturday 12th September. I spoke to the Home Office that day and then to the Home Secretary on Sunday 13th September. I understand that calls had been planned for Friday 11th September, but unfortunately these never materialised.

I have made my feelings very plain to the Home Office about how engagement was conducted with local stakeholders and, by their own admission, how they have fallen short of professional expectations. They have since established the Asylum Accommodation Strategic Working Group as a forum for discussions about Penally Training Camp. This involves participants from Pembrokeshire County Council, Hywel Dda University Health Board, Dyfed-Powys Police, Home Office, the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales, Welsh Government, Public Health Wales and Clearsprings. This forum will ensure there is transparent engagement and consultation on the site going forward.

Number of asylum seekers at the site

The occupation capacity has been downscaled slightly from 250 to 234 to comply with COVID-19 regulations. Asylum seekers will be arriving at the site tonight and numbers will continue to arrive during the rest of the week, up to the maximum capacity of the site.

Nationality

All occupants of the site have gone through the asylum screening process, which includes being photographed, having fingerprints taken, and stating their reason for claiming asylum etc. The Home Office informs us that the majority of occupants will be from Iran and Iraq.

Plaque at the site entrance

I was notified today that the plaque at the site's entrance had been covered by a tarpaulin. Upon investigation, it transpires that this was done in error by the Ministry of Defence last week and has now been removed.

Planning

A query was raised about whether the correct planning procedures had been followed. The Home Office has confirmed that this was not initially the case, but that the change of use has now been completed under the correct planning legislation.

COVID-19 regulation compliance

As part of the screening process, all those coming to Penally from a country not on the travel corridor list will have gone through a 14-day quarantine period in a hotel. They will be tested

for COVID-19 in line with Government guidelines. If any of the proposed occupants is currently living in a local lockdown area, they will not be moved from that location.

Right to remain

I am told that occupants of the site should have an asylum decision pending and I am trying to find out the average length of time this is taking. Obviously this is longer than usual due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however plans are being made to move the detailed face to face interviews online.

Security

As previously stated, the occupants are not under detention so they can legally leave the site. However, all their meals and wellbeing services will be provided on the site and the Home Office anticipate they will have limited need to leave the site. If they do, there will be a checking in and out system to monitor where the residents are at all times. Anybody failing to return to the site will trigger an absconding process.

Residents will not be receiving any state funding, so will not be in a position to make purchases outside the site.

What happens if asylum is declined?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a backlog in excess of 10,000 claims has built up in the systems. This means that returning people to their country of origin, or where they first applied for asylum, has been restricted or cancelled. As more applications are processed the backlog, and therefore the need for emergency accommodation, should reduce.

If asylum is granted will applicants have to be housed locally?

The Home Office does not anticipate this.

Assistance

I have had a number of Penally residents contacting me to offer support and donations. If you would like to do this please direct your help towards the Refugee Council.

What does 'temporary' mean?

The arrangement with the Ministry of Defence is for up to 12 months, however the site will be discontinued sooner if the Home Office is able.

I have suggested alternative sites to both the Ministry of Justice and the MoD, especially given that Home Office advice has been to house asylum seekers in "major conurbations".

Policy

A number of people have asked if I personally support the Home Office decision. I fully support our proposed points-based immigration system and border controls which should be fair and humane once fully in place. Compassion remains a vital consideration in this process.

I make a clear distinction when it comes to the professional handling of this situation which has, by the Home Office's own admission, fallen short of expectations. I have made my views regarding the handling of this process, and those of local residents in Penally and Tenby very clear.