

Home Office put refugees in barracks after fears better housing would ‘undermine confidence’ in system

Exclusive: Internal documents reveal ministers justified placing hundreds of asylum seekers in military camps because more ‘generous’ accommodation would damage public perception of asylum system

The Home Office placed hundreds of asylum seekers in controversial military barracks following fears that better accommodation would "undermine confidence" in the system, internal documents reveal.

Concerns have been mounting about conditions in two Ministry of Defence (MoD) sites – known as Napier Barracks, in Folkestone, Kent, and Penally Barracks, in Pembrokeshire – since they were repurposed for housing asylum seekers last September. Campaigners, lawyers and humanitarian groups have reported poor access to healthcare and legal advice, as well as concerns over coronavirus safety.

Napier Barracks burst into flames on Friday and asylum seekers say they have suffered electricity and hot water outages since the fire, with Kent Police saying five men have been arrested after a disturbance at the camp.

It has now emerged that the Home Office, in its equality impact assessment of the plans to use MoD sites to house asylum seekers, justified the move by stating that housing these individuals in more “generous” accommodation would “undermine public confidence in the asylum system”.

Critics say the document shows ministers “pandering to prejudice” and jeopardising health for “political ends”.

The assessment states that destitute asylum seekers are “not analogous” to British citizens and other permanent residents who are in need of state welfare assistance, and that the “less generous” support provided to this group is “justified by the need to control immigration”.

“Any provision of support over and beyond what is necessary to enable the individuals to meet their housing and subsistence needs could undermine public confidence in the asylum system and hamper wider efforts to tackle prejudice and promote understanding within the general community and amongst other migrant groups,” it states.

The decision to use military barracks as accommodation for asylum seekers came less than a month after the Home Office apologised for an “operational failure” which meant asylum seekers were placed in a hotel in Ms Patel’s constituency of Witham. The apology came after former Ukip leader Nigel Farage shared a video of himself in front of the hotel claiming “illegal migrants” were living there.

Shadow immigration minister Holly Lynch said the claims were “reprehensible” and an “affront to the values of the British people” to lock people into accommodation with no way to self-isolate, and called for residents to be moved into Covid-secure housing “as a matter of urgency”.

Sophie Lucas, solicitor at Duncan Lewis, a law firm that has represented a number of asylum seekers who have subsequently been moved out of the barracks, said the document insinuated that a less generous system for asylum seekers was a “legitimate response” to outcry from extremist groups.

“Instead of attempting to combat bigotry and hostility towards asylum seekers, the Home Office have pandered to prejudice. Penalising an already extremely vulnerable group of people in this way is unlawful,” she said.

Chai Patel, legal director at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI), said: “The government implied these cramped and disused barracks were being used as temporary housing because there was no alternative.

“But this document reveals that Home Office has been jeopardising people’s health for partly political ends – prioritising playing ‘tough’ on migration over the lives of extremely vulnerable people, who’ve been placed in conditions reminiscent of those they were fleeing.”

The equality impact assessment seen by The Independent, which was carried out in September, also stated that social distancing was possible in the barracks, citing that “beds in dormitory style sleeping quarters [would] be at least two metres apart” and that “regular cleaning will take place to reduce Covid risks”. It said residents would receive “equivalent assistance” to that which they would have if placed in alternative initial accommodation or a hotel.

A Covid outbreak at Napier Barracks – which has not been used by military personnel for more than five years – eventually spread to more than 100 people after asylum seekers were banned from leaving the site and threatened with arrest if they did.

Naomi Phillips, director of policy and advocacy at British Red Cross, said the sites were “completely inappropriate and inhumane” as housing for refugees, and called for them to be close “urgently”.

“Tragically, for the individuals who have been made to live in these sites, the fears that we and others had have been borne out. The people we’ve spoken to have told us that they didn’t receive health screenings, were given little or no information about what was happening to them, and simply do not feel safe in the barracks,” she added.

Bridget Chapman, of local charity Kent Refugee Action Network, said the Home Office’s decision to use “inappropriate and isolated” buildings as asylum seeker accommodation was a “deliberate choice to create a narrative of being deliberately tough on those seeking sanctuary”.

Dr Claire van Nispen tot Pannerden, an infectious disease consultant at Doctors of the World, said the assessment failed to address the reality of the ongoing pandemic, describing it as “beyond negligent” to accommodate people who are not from a household in large shared accommodation with shared facilities.

Mr Philp said he rejected allegations that asylum seekers had not been able to access healthcare or legal advice, claiming they could access healthcare “whenever needed” and were “freely able” to contact legal representatives or support.

“These sites have accommodated soldiers and army personnel in the past – it is wrong to say that it is not good enough for asylum claimants,” he added.