

## **PRESS RELEASE: Stop housing asylum seekers in ex-military barracks and start engaging with us, say 60 community organisations**

**8th December 2020**

More than 60 community organisations working with people in detention or seeking asylum have written to the Immigration Minister and Shadow Home Secretary highlighting the risks of housing vulnerable asylum-seekers in crowded barracks where social distancing is impossible, and urging them to implement community based alternatives, to avoid further harm.

The letters highlighted parallels between the barracks and the UK's system of indefinite immigration detention, which has been the subject of several high profile inquiries and is widely known to cause long lasting mental harm. There has already been one suicide attempt at one of the barracks since they were opened amidst some controversy in September 2020.

The joint letters have been coordinated by AVID (Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees) and signed by Refugee Action, the Scottish Refugee Council and Medical Justice among others.

"It is impossible to socially distance when there are as many as 28 people sharing two toilets and up to 14 people sleeping in a room. As you know, there have already been a number of Covid-19 cases in the barracks which shows the difficulty in keeping the virus contained in such conditions," they said.

"While the barracks are not detention, the consequences for individuals are the same: being isolated and cut off from support networks, without access to legal advice and other specialist help, while being held in wholly inappropriate conditions for an unknown length of time."

The letters outlined how the isolated locations of the barracks have left residents exposed to abuse by far-right activists who have easily been able to locate the MOD sites in Penally, Wales and Folkestone, Kent.

The organisations also proposed that the government find ways to keep people connected to their community while awaiting an asylum decision.

'Recent government figures showed that in September 76% of people awaiting a decision on their asylum claim had been waiting for more than six months, up from 58% in September 2019. There is growing evidence that managing people's cases while they remain in the community with access to support is both less expensive and more effective. Given the significant backlog in processing asylum applications, made worse during the current pandemic, it is time to consider alternatives,' they said.

In September, the government commissioned previously ex-military sites at Penally in Pembrokeshire, Wales, and Folkstone in Kent, England, as accommodation for people who are seeking asylum in the UK. Despite defining the barracks as temporary accommodation, the Home Office announced that it intends to use the sites for a year.

Ali McGinley, Director of the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees said,

"There is no shortage of evidence that the UK's system of immigration detention does very little other than cause long lasting damage: to the individuals held, but also to their families and communities. We've seen this first hand over many years. Choosing to ignore this by replicating the worst injustices of this system in the barracks accommodation is irresponsible, dangerous and puts many more people at risk. We urge the government to use this opportunity to think again about this reactive and risky approach, and to engage with people within the system, and the communities



association of visitors to  
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supporting them, to find a safe and supported alternative.”

Dr Razia Shariff, CEO of Kent Refugee Action Network said,

"KRAN has witnessed first-hand how the current asylum system and arrangements are letting vulnerable asylum seekers down. Having been invited to ongoing strategic discussions regarding Napier Barracks from when the news was first announced, and being reassured that all was well, even when we warned that more had to be done, we are very frustrated that those inside are not being offered what is needed to maintain their basic dignity, humanity and respect. We would welcome an open and transparent discussion between civil society, those with lived experiences and the government on how to establish a fair, just and humane asylum system in the UK."

Stephen Hale, Chief Executive of Refugee Action said:

“The disused army barracks in Penally and Folkestone are inhumane places to hold people who have fled war and persecution and must be shut down immediately.

We have serious concerns about the mental and physical health of often-traumatised people forced to live behind barbed wire and high fences so close to each other in the middle of a pandemic. People need access to medical and legal support that simply cannot be provided in those conditions.

Home Office ministers are failing in their duty of care to people in the asylum system. It must urgently work with providers to find more suitable accommodation in a wider range of areas across the country.”

-ENDS-

**For more information or to arrange interviews, please contact Orla Gill  
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#### About AVID

AVID is the national network of organisations providing volunteer support inside detention. With over 13 members, we collectively have a presence in every single detention centre in the UK, and some prisons. For over 25 years we have worked to ensure the rights of individuals subject to immigration detention are upheld, while providing emotional and practical support.

Web: [www.aviddetention.org.uk](http://www.aviddetention.org.uk)

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