



**AVID (Association of Visitors to
Immigration Detainees)**

We Work Keltan House
115 Mare Street
London
E8 4RU

2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

www.gov.uk/home-office

22 December 2020

Dear Cosignatories,

Thank you for your letter of 8 December 2020 addressed to the Home Secretary. I am responding as the Minister responsible for the operation of the asylum support system.

My officials and I welcome the contribution that AVID and the wider voluntary sector have played in the development and ongoing delivery of our key schemes, which are designed to safeguard some of the world's most vulnerable people.

The UK has a proud history of welcoming and supporting those in need of our protection. The government is committed to doing everything necessary to protect the rights of asylum seekers and provide them with the safe, secure accommodation they deserve, and will continue to work with communities to deliver on these obligations in a sustainable way.

It is Home Office policy to move people into suitable Dispersed Accommodation (DA) once their claim for support has been assessed. The current global pandemic has presented significant challenges when it comes to the provision of asylum accommodation. This has included the need to source sufficient accommodation to meet demand.

Our accommodation providers are also working to maximise accommodation procurement opportunities throughout the UK, however they can only do so with local authority agreement. It is our intention to move all individuals in contingency accommodation into suitable DA as soon as reasonably practical.

Following a review of available government property, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) agreed to temporarily hand over two of their sites in Kent and Pembrokeshire, which are now being used to house asylum seekers. They previously housed armed service personnel.

The use of the sites, and other contingency accommodation such as hotels, continues to be essential as we work to fix the asylum system, given the imperative to ensure that our statutory obligations can always be met and that we treat all asylum seekers humanely and with the dignity they deserve.

You raise concerns in your letter about these sites being unsuitable. Please be assured that we take the safety and wellbeing of the asylum seekers we accommodate very seriously. The accommodation is safe, secure, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped in line with existing asylum accommodation standards contractual requirements. These sites have also been adapted to ensure social distancing can be maintained, taking account of public health guidance.

Our accommodation providers also have considerable experience managing asylum seeker accommodation, and the self-contained nature of the former MoD sites allows for full provision to be made for asylum seekers' needs, something that can be challenging to deliver in hotels.

All occupants will be provided with three meals each day which, as in other catered sites, takes account of dietary requirements in accordance with religious needs as appropriate.

Televisions are available at the site and Wi-Fi will also be provided allowing for internet access. Mobile telephones are also provided if service users do not have one to ensure that contact can be maintained with friends, family members and support services.

This support is in addition to NGO support, who will provide additional support and welfare input. This is the same provision as provided in the rest of the asylum estate.

Furthermore, our providers are trained to identify vulnerabilities and where safeguarding issues are identified the first responder will make an assessment to the level of risk and the next appropriate response to provide support.

Regular welfare checks are conducted on all service users, including behavioural monitoring of those who show signs of vulnerability and are not engaging with fellow service users and staff. We work closely with our accommodation providers to ensure that all asylum seekers in supported initial accommodation are aware of, and have access to, Migrant Help's helpline. This is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, if they need help, advice or guidance, including signposting to relevant mental and medical health services.

As you have noted in your letter, the asylum seekers being accommodated at the sites are not being held under detention powers. All asylum seekers on site are free to come and go and there is no curfew. In order to ensure safety on site, it is naturally important to know who is there at any time and this is achieved through a signing in/out process. There is an expectation that asylum seekers are on site overnight (given they are being provided paid-for accommodation on a no-choice basis), and a safeguarding call is made to anyone not on-site by 10pm.

Protecting the health and safety of asylum seekers during the coronavirus pandemic has been our priority and to test our effectiveness we have reviewed the sites we use for coronavirus regulation and guidance compliance.

All of those entering the country from areas requiring self-isolation on entry into the UK have completed two weeks self-isolation before being placed into accommodation.

The Home Office has sought Public Health England/Wales advice on how we can make best use of this accommodation, working within the constraints of the configuration, whilst minimising risks from COVID-19. Dormitories are utilised as shared rooms with a minimum distance between beds of at least two metres. This is complemented by a range of additional safety measures including increased cleaning of surfaces, availability of hand sanitisers, a track and trace system and communications with residents around COVID-19 control measures. Occupants of these sites also have the same access to testing as the general population.

As the Home Secretary has said, we are determined to reform the broken asylum system to make it firm and fairer - compassionate to those fleeing oppression, persecution and tyranny but tough on those who abuse our system.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Philp', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Chris Philp MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Immigration Compliance and the Courts