



[Information Redacted]  
Home Secretary

23 September 2020

Dear Home Secretary

On 19 September, I received a response to my letter to you from [Information Redacted].

I wrote to urge you to introduce a two-week delay in transferring asylum seekers to the Penally army training camp in Pembrokeshire to allow proper preparations to be made. I am very disappointed this necessary request was declined.

The unfolding situation at the camp, in the early hours of Tuesday morning, as the first people to be transferred to the camp arrived, demonstrates why more preparation time was essential. We witnessed ugly scenes outside the camp as protestors sought to obstruct the arrival of the first asylum seekers to be transferred. Healthcare workers arriving at the site have also felt threatened. This situation is not acceptable.

The letter from your junior minister stated: "The site will be ready for use from Monday 21 September." But this is clearly not the case. Four asylum seekers have arrived but no fire risk assessment has been supplied to partners; the police are awaiting an operational procedures plan; health colleagues cannot provide healthcare on site due to safety fears, and concerns relating to Covid-19 infection control have not yet been addressed sufficiently.

The letter also said: "We all have a moral duty to protect some of the most vulnerable people in society." The image of asylum seekers having to arrive at the camp in the middle of a highly-charged protest, which I sought to avoid through a short delay, is a source of extreme frustration. The Home Office approach to this situation has enabled an information vacuum to exist, which the far right has exploited effectively in Penally.

It is short-sighted to focus dogmatically on one Home Office aim – to reduce the costs of the asylum system, while simultaneously promulgating the rise of extremism – something which the Home Office seeks to eliminate.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

It remains a significant concern that the Home Office intends to accommodate people who may have fled persecution by the military in their country of origin in an army camp in the UK, risking a re-traumatising effect without safeguards being put in place. It is concerning that this plan appears to disregard basic trauma-informed practice, such as a person's right to privacy and dignity. These stressors are highly likely to exacerbate underlying psychological conditions. The effect of arriving at the camp during an active protest may have a profound effect on the individuals involved.

There are also problems presented by use of the Penally camp, which cannot be surmounted by a short delay. Most fundamentally, this is a rural location with none of the specialist services which asylum populations require – traumatic stress mental health services, communicable disease specialists, English for Speakers of Other Languages tutors, immigration legal advisors, interpreters, or refugee drop-in services. Some of these services could be temporarily 'stood up' with the provision of funding from the Home Office, though many would take longer to put in place.

It is not acceptable for the Home Office to proceed as though this is any 'normal' asylum dispersal situation and therefore award no funding to the public authorities, which are striving to make the best of this situation. Under the asylum dispersal system, local authorities *consent* to be part of the system. The lack of resources provided by the system and specialist expertise in the locality are major factors in why we only have four main asylum dispersal areas in Wales. Pembrokeshire has *not consented* to asylum dispersal and it is therefore proper that they are compensated by the Home Office to put local expertise in place.

I appreciate that the Home Office is seeking to address a significant backlog of asylum claims as quickly as possible. However, we have not been consulted about the Home Office's thinking and forward plans to address this situation. The Welsh Government wants to support those seeking asylum. We cannot do that effectively without improved engagement.

In the last few weeks, Welsh local authorities have been asked to respond to various asylum support situations despite unprecedented demand caused by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. This has included the Penally situation, the resumption of both positive asylum support cessations and negative asylum support cessations, a separate request to find hundreds of additional bed spaces for asylum dispersal accommodation, and consideration of support for Hong Kong nationals who may claim asylum in the UK.

That can only happen if we have a coherent understanding of Home Office thinking; with timely communication, sufficient funding and adequate mobilisation time.

Nevertheless, we are committed to improve this situation as rapidly as possible. If we are to be successful in the shared endeavour of widening asylum dispersal we need to fully understand the Home Office's intentions and to work together to achieve a solution which works for Welsh communities.

Every Welsh local authority has resettled refugees under the Syrian Resettlement Programme; Welsh asylum dispersal areas are consistently in the top 10 areas of the UK for asylum seekers accommodated per head of population and Wales led the way in the development of the community sponsorship model. We are committed to doing more but we need the Home Office to work with us in this endeavour.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Wales and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, [Information Redacted].

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