

The Bishop of Durham

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11th February, 2021

Secretary of State for the Home Department
The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
2 Marsham Street
Westminster
London
SW1P 4DF

Dear Secretary of State

Open letter: Asylum accommodation

We have watched with growing concern events unfold at Napier Barracks in Folkestone, Kent and are extremely concerned about the welfare of asylum seekers housed across Ministry of Defence sites.

As you know, in the absence of safe and legal routes to apply for refugee status outside the UK, many have no choice but to make a dangerous and perilous journey to seek safety from conflict, persecution, and violence. After such a traumatic journey, having had to often spend time behind wire fences in refugee camps, it is simply insensitive to house people in such environments. In a global pandemic it is nothing short of irresponsible and risks the lives of residents and staff alike. Even as a temporary measure, ex-military barracks are unfit for purpose and entirely inappropriate. Requiring members from different households to use and live in shared facilities greatly increases the risk of infection and residents cannot be held responsible for virus transmission rates when social distancing is not possible.

We are therefore calling for an immediate end to the use of military barracks as accommodation for those seeking sanctuary in the UK. It is not a fair or justified response to your legal duty to house asylum seekers who would otherwise become destitute. We understand it is the Government's intention to move all individuals in contingency accommodation into suitable dispersed accommodation as soon as reasonably practical. Can you therefore confirm that the Home Office will not expand the use of military barracks for contingency accommodation and whether the Government will set out a timeline for their closure.

We do appreciate the unprecedented pressures the Government is facing to provide accommodation to those who are awaiting a determination of their status, following the welcome decision not to evict people from asylum accommodation through a period of the pandemic. However, a long term sustainable action plan has to be put in place to secure suitable, dignified dispersal accommodation. Steps to speed up accurate processing of asylum applications will also reduce pressure on the system.

Our shared faith as signatories to this letter, leads us to view all human beings as equal and deserving of respect, dignity and welcome. We have witnessed at first hand, the generous welcome provided by civic and faith groups to those seeking protection. When asylum seekers are housed within communities, it allows for better integration and access to support services. Asylum seekers are often no longer seen as "other" but as neighbours and friends. It is in this environment

that asylum seekers physical and mental wellbeing can be protected, and they are also able to better engage with their asylum application.

We ask that the Government continue to work constructively with local authorities, devolved administrations and support organisations to secure sufficient and appropriate dispersal accommodation in local communities and to end the use of barracks as a matter of urgency.

We look forward to hearing your response to the issues raised.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Butler". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

The Bishop of Durham, The Rt Revd Paul Butler

Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster and President of Churches Together in England

Rt Revd Paul McAleenan
Lead Bishop for Migrants and Refugees, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

The Bishop of London, The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally DBE

His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos
Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London

Hugh Osgood
Free Churches President of Churches Together in England

Revd Dr Paul Goodliff BA MTh
General Secretary, Churches Together in England

The Bishop of Loughborough, The Rt Revd Dr Gulnar (Guli) Francis-Dehqani BA MA PhD

The Bishop Rt of Dover and the Bishop in Canterbury, The Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin

The Bishop of Bradwell, The Rt Revd Dr John Perumbalath
Chair of Churches Refugee Network in Britain and Ireland

The Bishop of Bristol, The Rt Revd Vivienne Faull

The Bishop of Reading, The Rt Revd Olivia Graham

The Bishop of Croydon, The Rt Revd Jonathan Clark

The Bishop of Oxford, The Rt Revd Steven Croft

The Bishop of Worcester, The Rt Revd Dr John Inge

The Bishop of Southwark, The Rt Revd Christopher Chessun

The Bishop of Gloucester, The Rt Revd Rachel Treweek

The Bishop of Leeds, The Rt Revd Nicholas Baines

Pastor Agu Irukwu,
Redeemed Christian Church of God, and Pastor Jesus House
President of Churches Together in England

Most Revd Father Oluwole A Abiola, OBE
President, Council of African and Caribbean Churches UK

The Revd Clare Downing
Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church

The Revd Richard Teal
President of the Methodist Conference 2020/2021

Mrs Carolyn Lawrence
Vice-President of the Methodist Conference 2020/2021

Dorothy Kendrick
President, Independent Methodist Connexion of Churches

Commissioner Anthony Cotterill
Territorial Leader for The Salvation Army in the UK and Republic of Ireland

Revd Judith Morris
General Secretary, Baptist Union of Wales

Revd Meirion Morris
General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of Wales

Revd Dan Yarnell
The Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Great Britain and Ireland

Roberta Hoey

Chair of the Provincial Board for the Moravian Church in Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Rev Trevor Howard BA(Hons), QTS, MA (Urban Ed), MTh.

Executive Vice-Chair of the Board of Churches in Communities International

Mr David Lockett

Chair of Trustees, on behalf of the Trustees of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion.

Rev Luke Larner

Chaplain of the Red Letter Christians UK network

Domenica Pecoraro

Kent Refugee Projects Officer, Diocese of Canterbury

The Revd Gareth Jones

Diocesan Refugee Coordinator, Diocese of Chelmsford

Revd Simeon Oladokun

Superintendent of Christ Apostolic Church, UK and Regional Secretary of CAC Europe