



3 April 2023

I am writing to express my grave concern about the Government's recent decision to move people seeking asylum from hotels to military bases, with the option of unused ferries remaining under consideration. As you may know, I have publicly objected to the use of hotels for people awaiting a decision on their asylum application: I recognise that they are expensive, harmful to good community relations, and above all, damaging to the health and wellbeing of those seeking asylum. However, using military bases in their stead does not solve any of the fundamental issues affecting our asylum system, and indeed risks exacerbating them. I am writing, therefore, to urge you to reconsider, and to establish human rights and human dignity as the unmovable core of our asylum system.

Housing asylum-seekers in military barracks is, of course, not new: the High Court ruled the use of Napier Barracks to be unlawful because of its "filthy" and "decrepit" conditions – a view shared by the [Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration](#), the [all-party parliamentary group on immigration detention](#) and [Doctors of the World](#). Those officials, politicians and healthcare professionals visiting the barracks found that the overcrowding, poor state of repair, and isolation from the wider community were causing high levels of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation and self-harm. In addition, the fatal typhoid outbreak at Manston airfield last autumn shows in the starkest terms the serious risk to physical, as well as mental, health that these environments pose.

The fact that military bases have been used before by the Home Office, with no apparent impact on the number of people seeking asylum in the UK, suggests they do not serve as a 'deterrence' – which, I believe, is one of the aspirations behind the Government's decision. In reality, as [internal Home Office research](#) has shown, creating a hostile environment for asylum seekers does not deter migrants, humanitarian or otherwise. Two decades ago, in fact, Home Office-commissioned research, [Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers](#), concluded there was "very little evidence that the sample respondents had a detailed knowledge of: UK immigration or asylum procedures; entitlements to benefits in the UK; or the availability of work in the UK".

The harshness of the surroundings in which we house those seeking sanctuary, then, will not lead to a reduction in the pressures on the asylum system. In fact, it is likely to cause more difficulties for policy makers and the public sector in the future: last year, [75% of initial decisions on asylum cases were positive](#), and even more are granted on appeal. Therefore, the people we accommodate, whether in hotels, camps or on ferries, are our future citizens, the future electorate, our future neighbours. If our policies cause harm to their physical and mental health, it is the NHS that will, in all likelihood, have to put it right. If our policies make people feel degraded, dehumanised, and criminalised, how can we expect them to settle well into our communities, workplaces and public square?



I am aware that hotels are hardly conducive to the integration of refugees. But, I know that in Leicester, our churches have at least been able to reach those seeking asylum with pastoral and practical support, connecting them to interpreters and ESOL classes, and helping with their eventual move to independent accommodation. From the hotels, children can at least attend school, and their families can learn English, and access legal advice. In Leicester, people awaiting an asylum decision regularly volunteer with local organisations as this gives them a sense of purpose and agency. For example, [refugees from Afghanistan living in Leicester worked with the Red Cross and the University of Leicester](#) to create health, wellbeing and language-learning resources for those living in hotels. With funding from the NHS, this project is being expanded and rolled out across the UK – and it would be impossible if those who were seeking asylum were isolated from other institutions and the wider community.

Housing asylum-seekers in hotels may be unsustainable. But, surely, the efforts and resources it will take to fit out military properties to house thousands more people, potentially procuring more facilities like ferries, and moving people from across the country could be better expended on solving the fundamental problems of [poor productivity within the asylum application system](#) itself (as [cited by the Home Secretary](#)). Based on the findings of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration in 2021, the waiting times for asylum seekers could be reduced by employing more technical specialist staff to provide guidance to asylum decision makers and conduct quality assurance; reducing staff turnover; and reinstating the official service standard to decide 98% of 'straightforward cases' within six months. Speeding up the decision-making process would reduce the pressure on the Home Office to supply accommodation, either in hotels or barracks.

I am urging you, therefore, to speak to your colleagues within Government and ask them to reconsider the decision to move asylum-seekers to military bases, and to focus their energies instead on creating an asylum system that works for the common good, by in the first instance, processing claims efficiently and sensitively. If that call cannot be heeded, then please do advocate for, at the very least: the companies managing the accommodation to be held to the strictest health and safety and safeguarding standards; for them to follow a trauma-informed approach in their communication to, and care of, people seeking asylum; and for the provision of ESOL classes, schooling for children, and good access to healthcare and legal advice.



These steps might prevent the worst of harms from befalling those who hope to bring their skills and giftings to the UK in return for refuge. But, above all, please do remember that, when it comes to fleeing war, persecution or famine, 'There but for the grace of God go I' holds true. Let us be known not for ineffectual cruelty, but for sharing the gifts of stability and abundance we in the UK have been given.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Martyn Snow" followed by a flourish.

Martyn Snow, Lord Bishop of Leicester