



Portland Port sets out facts

Portland Port has issued a new update clarifying facts about an accommodation facility for asylum seekers.

Preparations are ongoing for the smooth arrival and operation of the Bibby Stockholm barge at the commercial port in Dorset.

They include discussions between the Home Office and local agencies about health provision, policing and community support.

Bill Reeves, chief executive of Portland Port, said: “We are encouraged by the progress being made by the Home Office and local agencies.

“Some of these plans are still being drawn together by ourselves, the Home Office and a local Multi Agency Forum but we are providing as much information as possible through our website, the media and elected representatives.

“We are aware of misunderstandings locally and hope people will have patience and refer to the factual information available and our clarification of some of the facts.”

The Home Office approached Portland Port some months ago, initially through a ship’s agent, to enquire about berthing a vessel to house refugees; the port did not approach the Home Office.

It was made clear to the port that the enquiry was to be handled in strict confidence, which is normal for prospective customers of the port.

Once the Home Office said that it wanted to proceed to an agreement, the port committed its support.

Bill said: “The port has good relationships with key government departments and always wants to respond positively when asked for support.

“Furthermore, the berthing of vessels is clearly a key element of the port’s core business.

“In addition to the motivation of responding positively to the Home Office the port will, of course, be making a profit from the project.

“Making a profit from operations is what well run private companies do. In the case of Portland Port, most of our profits are reinvested in the business.

“In fact, in the last eight years the port has invested more than £40 million in developing its infrastructure and more than £3 million in repairs and maintenance. It is this investment that has enabled the port’s continued growth and development, not least in the growth of the cruise business.

“This investment also underpins the continued good health of the business, which in turn has supported a 25% growth in people employed by the port itself.

“Companies that make good profits, if they reinvest them in the business, bring significant benefits to the local community in which they operate.”

Portland Port also set out that:

- When the Bibby Stockholm arrives there will be a core staff who have experience of managing this type of facility for asylum seekers. The management company may seek to recruit locally for some of the additional roles onboard.
- The Home Office continues to work closely with Dorset Council and key partners including the local NHS and Police to manage any impact on key local services in Portland, and address the local communities’ concerns, including through financial support.
- Funding for the local NHS is likely to be focused on ensuring that primary care is provided on the barge for asylum seekers.
- When the Bibby Stockholm arrives in Portland Port it will be connected to the port’s fresh water and mains sewage network. The port will also provide non-sewage liquid waste and dry waste disposal services through its existing, on-site, facilities.
- Once the barge has arrived and been connected to the port’s services the first group of asylum seekers will arrive. The numbers on board will be scaled up over several weeks so that each new group can be absorbed in a structured manner.
- Asylum seekers will have been through a ‘suitability screening’ process that includes physical and mental health screening. All asylum seekers housed on the barge will be adult males with an age range of 18 to 65.
- Asylum seekers will receive cultural awareness advice aimed at ensuring they understand the social norms in the UK; the process of familiarisation has already begun as the asylum seekers are in the country and in the system.
- Asylum seekers will be subject to a code of conduct about their behaviour, including when out in the community.
- Asylum seekers will not be free to move around the port. When on port property they will be kept on the Bibby Stockholm or in a secure compound adjacent to the barge. Facilities in the compound will be finalised once their requirements are better understood.
- Portland port will provide a bus service to take asylum seekers from the secure compound out of the port to destinations that will be agreed with local agencies. The objective is for most of these destinations to be linked to activities arranged through the local community and voluntary sector. Asylum seekers will not be simply dropped off or ‘dumped’ in one location.

A Multi Agency Forum (MAF), made up of local, regional and national representatives from Dorset Council, local NHS, Dorset Police, public agencies and community organisations, is meeting weekly to plan and co-ordinate arrangements for the smooth operation of the facility.

This includes provision of health services, safety and security, regulatory arrangements, and voluntary sector involvement.

There are sub-groups linked to the MAF, including one for the voluntary and community sector.

The MAF will be able to draw on best practice and experience gained at an accommodation facility at Napier Barracks in Folkestone, Kent, which was opened in 2020 and has housed a changing population of 328 adult male asylum seekers.

Activity at Napier has included the formation of a 'friends of Napier' group and a strong programme of activities for asylum seekers, including English lessons, recreation, religious support, volunteering and sport.

Bill said: "The port is aware that the Napier facility, albeit land based is very similar to what is being planned with the barge that will be berthed in Portland.

"The experience in Folkestone is that there has been no increase in crime in the area as a consequence of the Napier project and asylum seekers absconding has been rare.

"The support of the community has been absolutely fundamental to the success at Napier, and we are grateful for the support of those working through the MAF to consider ways of replicating this experience here."

Visit Portland Port's website for more details and the Home Office factsheet at <https://www.portland-port.co.uk/news>.