

Full Council – Portland barge

Chair

In his opening remarks the Vice-chairman reminded us all of the need to approach our deliberations this evening in a spirit of tolerance and respect.

Our next agenda item is a motion about the agreement reached between the Home Office and Portland Port over the Bibby Stockholm asylum barge. This is a sensitive topic, with some strong views on all sides.

May I remind you all of the need for a respectful debate tonight. Please make your points in a measured way, avoiding any use of inflammatory language.

At the beginning of our meeting I welcomed representatives from the Youth Council who have joined us in the council chamber tonight. Their presence makes it all the more important that as elected representatives we show leadership, listening respectfully to the views of others even when we don't agree with them.

The Chief Executive will now make a statement before Cllr Ferrari proposes his motion.

Matt

Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to set out some background information for members before you debate the motion.

History

In late March this year, Dorset Council was made aware of discussions between Portland Port and the Home Office to site an accommodation barge for asylum seekers in Portland Port.

We immediately voiced objections to this on the basis that Portland is not a suitable location for this vessel. Dorset Council was not consulted by the Home Office and had no say in the decision. Dorset Council does not own the port.

Despite our concerns and those of others in the wider public system in Dorset, the Home Office and Portland Port went ahead and signed the contract for this arrangement in early April.

In recognition of the council's statutory responsibilities and to ensure robust arrangements are in place, we established a Multi-Agency Forum (MAF) with representatives from national, regional and local public sector agencies, Portland Port and the Home Office. This Forum meets weekly to discuss plans and arrangements for the barge, with specialist sub-groups meeting in the time between.

We are working in the best interests of both residents and asylum seekers to make sure arrangements operate smoothly, with minimal impact on local services and communities.

The Forum is overseeing arrangements for the provision of health services, operational arrangements such as transport and waste, and the safety and security of local residents and the asylum seekers.

Throughout April and May, we also investigated whether to pursue legal action to challenge to the Home Office's decision to site a barge for asylum seekers in Portland Port. We have our own in-house legal team, but we also sought specialist, external legal advice from King's Counsel, a national expert in this field.

After much careful consideration and having been advised that we did not have strong grounds to challenge the Home Office we decided to not pursue legal action. The Leader has spoken in greater detail about this in answer to public questions earlier on the agenda.

Faced with clear legal advice, our position has been to work with the Home Office and our partners to ensure the smooth operation of the barge, and to minimise impact on public services, local residents and local businesses.

We have been pushing for the provision for the asylum seekers accommodated on the barge to be properly resourced and effective. As announced last week, Dorset Council has been offered funding of £3,500 per occupied bed and an additional £377,000 for the voluntary and community sector services that will be commissioned. NHS Dorset and Dorset Police have also been securing funding for their work related to the barge.

Key Facts

If I may finish by giving some key facts

The Home Office is working with Corporate Travel Management (CTM) who will be responsible for the day-to-day management of the barge.

The Home Office and Portland Port have a commercial arrangement but as Dorset Council we do not know the detail of that arrangement.

The barge is expected to be in Portland Port for 18 months.

There will be about 50 people in the first group of asylum seekers to arrive on the barge. Over time, this will increase to up to 500 asylum seekers.

Those housed on the barge will be adult males aged between 18 to 65 from various countries. All will have been in the UK for some time.

The asylum seekers will have been through a 'suitability screening' process that includes physical and mental health checks and security screenings such as identity checks against UK immigration and police data bases (including international databases).

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 who will stay on the barge have already been accommodated in the UK for some time.

There will be a core staff on the Bibby Stockholm barge, from Corporate Travel Management (CTM) who will be responsible for managing the services on the barge. CTM, who managed two Scottish vessels, have experience of managing this type of accommodation facility. A specialist and experienced security provider will also be working on site 24/7.

The asylum seekers accommodated on the vessel will not be detained and will be free to come and go while adhering to the health and safety of the Port itself. The Home Office will provide a bus service to take asylum seekers from the port to destinations agreed with local agencies. The aim is for most of these destinations to be linked to activities for the asylum seekers, arranged through the local community and voluntary sector.

Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to provide this background information to members.