

Portland Port – Frequently Asked Questions

Please find answers below to the most Frequently Asked Questions about Portland Port's role in the provision of a barge for asylum seekers. These are correct as of July 2023. More updates and information can be found on the Portland Port website at <https://www.portland-port.co.uk/>.

Why is Portland Port agreeing to an asylum seekers' barge?

Portland Port is providing a berth for the Bibby Stockholm barge because the provision of berths for ships and other types of vessels is a key element of its core business.

The port, which is a privately-owned business, also strongly believes that providing a berth for the Bibby Stockholm is the right thing to do.

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

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

The port has space, the capacity, infrastructure to support the government's requirements.

It will allow the port and Dorset to play its part in the national effort to house some of the thousands of asylum seekers needing accommodation, including some who have left war torn countries and the threat of persecution overseas.

Under Part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office has a legal obligation to support asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute.

The Home Office is also planning other accommodation facilities elsewhere in the UK.

How much is Portland Port getting paid?

This is confidential. The port does not disclose details of contractual arrangements for any of its customers and tenants.

Is Portland Port making money from the Bibby Stockholm?

Yes, Portland Port is a commercial operation and makes money from all its activities.

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.

The port needs to have a diverse and profitable business in order to continue to support the local economy and community – providing jobs and space for businesses and commercial tenants.

In the last eight years the port has invested more than £40 million in developing 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.

What about consultation?

Portland has provided a range of information for local people, councils and groups.

It was unable to disclose information earlier due to the confidential nature of negotiations with 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.

A wider community information and awareness programme was then launched, with the Home Office and local elected representatives.

The port has provided a range of information to keep the community informed, including communications on its website, a detailed fact sheet/Q&A from the Home Office, social media, its own press releases and updates from a Multi-Agency Forum (MAF) set up to co-ordinate preparations for the barge.

The port also held meetings on site with the Home Office for elected representatives from local councils, business and other groups. More of these meetings are planned after the vessel arrives.

Who has the Port talked to and what information has it provided?

The port has provided a wide range of information and met people in person to answer questions and discuss concerns.

It has held meetings at the port with the Home Office for elected representatives from Weymouth Town Council, Portland Town Council and Dorset Council, plus Weymouth and Portland Chamber of Commerce, Weymouth BID and businesses in Castletown.

It welcomed them into the port to address concerns, provide more information and offer reassurance. The sessions, including a Home Office representative, were scheduled as part of a programme of discussion with elected councillors and community representatives.

The sessions were an opportunity to listen to concerns, answer questions, give clarification and provide more information about the accommodation facility.

Further meetings are planned. This is part of a wider community information and awareness programme with the Home Office.

Portland Port has also provided communications on its website and social media, detailed fact sheets from the Home Office, press releases and updates from the Multi-Agency Forum.

It is making as much information as possible publicly available on its website, through the media and via a newsletter which was delivered to 12,500 properties on Portland and in Wyke Regis.

What is the MAF?

The Multi Agency Forum (MAF) is co-ordinating preparations for the arrival of the Bibby Stockholm.

It is made up of representatives from the Home Office, Portland Port, Dorset Council, NHS Dorset, Dorset Police, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, Portland Port, community groups and charities.

This includes health services, policing, safety, security, regulatory arrangements and voluntary sector involvement to provide activities and support for asylum seekers.

When will the Bibby Stockholm arrive?

The Home Office will confirm a date with us. The first group of asylum seekers are due to embark soon after it arrives at Portland.

Who is operating the Bibby Stockholm?

Corporate Travel Management (CTM) is responsible for the barge. It has been contracted to run the barge on behalf of the Home Office.

It has a strong track record of providing this kind of accommodation. It has worked closely and successfully with councils and other public and voluntary organisations in managing two vessels for refugees in Scotland. When the Bibby Stockholm arrives there will be a core staff who have experience of managing this type of facility. There will be specialist 24/7 security.

What facilities will be on board?

There are a range of facilities.

This includes ensuite accommodation. There will be catering facilities on board and 24/7 security.

The vessel will have windows, air conditioning, heating units, storage and WIFI. There are multiple communal spaces, a canteen and laundry plus plans for exercise, multi-faith, and communal recreational facilities.

Basic healthcare will be provided on board. This is subject to ongoing discussions between the local NHS and Home Office.

Facilities will be designed to provide for the essential needs of those on board to minimise the impact on local communities and local services.

The barge is an accommodation vessel not a prison. The space available in the cabins for occupants will be in line with maritime industry safety regulations.

How will it work in practice?

Portland Port is providing the berth and a dedicated compound. CTM and its contractors are responsible for day to day operations on the Bibby Stockholm.

Various members of the MAF will be responsible for healthcare, activities and other arrangements.

The barge will be connected to Portland Port's fresh water and mains sewerage network.

The port will also provide non-sewage liquid waste and dry waste disposal services through its existing, on-site, facilities. Generators will be used to power the vessel.

The Home Office will provide a bus service to take asylum seekers from the port to destinations agreed with local agencies. The objective is for most of these destinations to be linked to activities for the asylum seekers, arranged through the local community and voluntary sector.

Basic health provision will be provided on board. The Home Office is providing additional funding to the council, and both the local NHS and police to provide services to support the barge and mitigate any impact on the local area.

Asylum seekers will receive cultural awareness advice aimed at ensuring they will understand the social norms in the UK. This is a long-standing process that occurs in asylum accommodation across the country to ensure community cohesion.

As an example, at Napier, Kent, which has successfully accommodated asylum seekers since 2020, there is an occupancy agreement outlining expectations of behaviour on site and in the community and an induction process which includes guidance on behaviour.

Napier 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.

When will the first asylum seekers arrive? How many will there be?

There will be a phased programme of embarkation with a small group initially to ensure that arrangements are suitable and can be fine-tuned if necessary.

Those involved are conscious of the need to manage arrivals in a way that local services can support.

More groups will follow in a phased way over the following weeks up to a total of about 500 although this number could fluctuate.

Who will be on board? Where will they be from?

The people on board will be asylum seekers whose applications are being considered by the government.

They will not be newly arrived individuals or people whose applications have been refused and are awaiting deportation.

The Bibby Stockholm will provide accommodation for single adult male asylum seekers aged 18 to 65 who would otherwise be destitute.

The criteria of single adult males has been agreed with local authorities and health partners to mitigate the burden on local public services, for example local schools and health services.

Those being accommodated are likely to come from various countries. Some may be from war-torn countries in the Middle East having fled war or persecution.

They will already be in the asylum system, having been through initial screening and checks and will live on board while their asylum applications are processed, and decisions made about settlement in the UK.

The asylum seekers coming to Portland will have already been through a process that is designed to separate the economic migrants from those who may have a right to asylum status. Economic migrants are dealt with separately.

The asylum seekers will have been living in hotels and been in the country since before March 7, and have therefore been in the system some time and are known to the Home Office, in terms of their background, health, and behaviour.

What screening and security checks will be carried out?

Asylum seekers coming to Portland will have undergone checks and be subject to suitability criteria.

This includes an initial screening, including checks against the UK's policing and immigration databases as well as international databases.

They will have had their fingerprints and identities recorded prior to going aboard.

Each individual's suitability to reside at Portland will be assessed, and only single adult males who are considered suitable to reside there will be accommodated. Each person's suitability will be assessed at regular intervals. They will have also undergone health checks.

Will they be straight from the boats in Kent?

No.

All will have undergone initial checks and have been in the country since before March 7 of this year. They may have been staying in hotels or accommodation elsewhere prior to coming to Portland.

What security will there be?

The Bibby Stockholm will be operated in a safe and secure way.

It will be berthed alongside a dedicated compound at the port. Asylum seekers will not be able to walk around inside the port for health and safety reasons. However, they are not detained and will be taken in and out of the port on shuttle buses.

The port has well-established security protocols in place, including its own police and security officers. The port is also in regular communication with Dorset Police and the Home Office.

The MAF's safety and security subgroup has reviewed the Port's Security Plan and it has been agreed this is suitable to cover the Bibby Stockholm.

The Home Office has contracted CTM to provide a specialist 24/7 security presence on the vessel and the port is managing any additional security. CTM has already managed vessels successfully and securely in Scotland.

A great deal of work is taking place to ensure that the Bibby Stockholm is operated in a safe, secure and successful way both for those onboard the vessel and in the local community. This is of the utmost importance.

What about any emergencies?

Robust emergency response plans will be in place, involving the port, police, and other emergency services.

Emergency response plans have been tested at a tabletop exercise on location at Portland Port. The exercise was well attended by members of the Local Resilience Forum and the Home Office where agencies worked through a challenging, theoretical emergency scenario.

The exercise confirmed developing emergency plans are robust.

What about crime and disorder?

Experience at Napier Barracks in Kent has shown no increase in crime and disorder from the asylum seekers.

Whilst the arrival of asylum seekers may increase the fear of crime, the reality is the presence of a well-managed facility will see very low levels of crime and antisocial behaviour and in some cases a reduction in the wider community due to the increased presence of support staff.

Dorset Police already supports an asylum-seeking community in Bournemouth. Whilst Portland is a different proposition, a minimal impact on crime and antisocial behaviour for the area is expected.

The port is aware that experiences within the communities surrounding other accommodation centres for asylum seekers have not experienced major increases in crime or antisocial behaviour.

Portland Port is working with Dorset Police, its strategic partners and the contractors responsible for the accommodation facility to develop plans and responses for the safety and security of the asylum seekers and the wider community.

Dorset Police has also been working with national colleagues to better understand the potential community impact of an asylum centre on Portland.

The Home Secretary and Ministers have approved a new policy for police forces impacted by proposals for large new sites and vessels. Under this policy, an agreement has been made to provide additional support for community policing for Dorset Police.

What about the safety of local people, especially women and girls?

Safety is a priority for all. No significant increase in crime and antisocial behaviour is expected.

Asylum seekers will receive advice about cultural sensitivities and behaviour. Also, asylum seekers coming to Portland will have already been in the country for some time staying at hotels so they will have an understanding of UK culture and expectations.

There is a strong incentive for them to be law-abiding because they are in the latter stages of their asylum assessment.

They have no greater ambition than to be accepted in the UK after fleeing sometimes horrific situations.

People who have travelled thousands of miles and have risked their lives to get here would not do anything to run the risk of their asylum claim being denied and them being deported.

What about cultural differences and behaviour?

Asylum seekers will be subject to a code of conduct.

They will receive cultural awareness training aimed at ensuring they understand the social norms in the UK.

The process of familiarisation has already begun as the asylum seekers are already in the country and in the system.

As an example, whilst it might be normal in their own country for men to gather in groups such behaviour is generally seen as threatening in the UK.

Asylum seekers will receive cultural awareness advice aimed at ensuring they understand the social norms in the UK. This is a long-standing process that occurs in asylum accommodation across the country to ensure community cohesion.

As an example, at Napier, Kent, which has successfully accommodated asylum seekers since 2020, there is an occupancy agreement outlining expectations of behaviour on site and in the community and an induction process which included guidance on behaviour.

What about the impact on health services?

Health provision will be provided for the asylum seekers.

At a basic level this will be provided onboard. More complex care will be treated within the health service elsewhere.

Following work by the MAF, the Home Office has offered the local area in Portland additional funding for both the local NHS and Police.

This is designed to meet the needs of the people who will be living aboard and to minimise the impact on the local community.

What will the asylum seekers do all day?

A range of activities are being planned.

Local community and voluntary groups in the MAF have been involved in arrangements.

This could include exercise, physical activity, English language lessons, cultural integration courses and volunteering opportunities.

The voluntary and community sector can play a vital role in the success of any asylum accommodation.

Additionally, as part of the Home Office's supplier arrangements with CTM, there is a provision for all service users to be given an opportunity to participate in meaningful activities.

Some asylum seekers may choose to stay on board but asylum seekers will also have the ability to leave the port via arranged transport.

A Friends group set up at the Napier accommodation facility in Kent and the support of the community has been fundamental to the success at Napier. The port is grateful for the support of those working through the MAF to consider ways of replicating this experience here.

Can the asylum seekers work?

In general, asylum seekers are unable to work while their asylum application is being processed. There may be potential opportunities, through the local voluntary sector, to undertake voluntary work in the community.

Where will asylum seekers be dropped off?

A range of different locations. A bus service will be provided to take asylum seekers from 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. The bus route has been agreed with local authorities and other stakeholders and will be kept under review.

Do the asylum seekers have to be back on board the Bibby Stockholm by 11pm?

No but they will be contacted if they are not back on board.

There is no set curfew. However, if an asylum seeker is later returning to the vessel, the team will make a call to the individual to check on their welfare.

A register is kept so it is known who is on and off the vessel.

Various scenarios, including if an individual misses the last bus, are being worked through with the local authorities and other stakeholders as part of the transport plan.

Won't they run away?

It is unlikely.

There is low risk of asylum seekers absconding. Experience at other accommodation facilities has shown this to be the case. Most will have nowhere to go if they leave the barge where they have housing, food and support.

Absconding would threaten their asylum status. The Home Office has procedures in place to track down and deal with any asylum seekers that may go missing.

Will they be able to walk in and out of the port or move around inside the port?

No. For health and safety reasons asylum seekers will not be able to move around the port. Transport will be available when asylum seekers wish to leave the barge and port.

Will the Bibby Stockholm be here for longer than 18 months?

It will be here on a temporary basis, initially for 18 months.

Are any more barges for asylum seekers coming to Portland?

No – definitely not. The port has not been approached about taking more barges for asylum seekers. It has agreed to berth one vessel for the Home Office and does not have capacity for more accommodation facilities of this kind.

How does this relate to the power station?

There is no connection whatsoever to the Energy From Waste (EFW) power station. Plans for this facility have absolutely no bearing on the plans for the Bibby Stockholm or vice-versa.

Is there a security risk for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) ships in the port?

No.
There will be no impact on the RFA ships which have a tried and tested routine for calls at Portland Port. Strict security measures will remain in place. Visits by the RFA vessels will continue as normal.

What about the environment?

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.

The port has a Waste Management Plan that ensures that all ships using the harbour dispose of all waste in an efficient and environmentally correct manner.

The Port is experienced in delivering its responsibilities to the marine environment, with many years of safe and successful operations. It is in the port's best interests to ensure it operates as sustainably as possible.

What about tourism and the local economy?

This is unlikely to be adversely affected. The local economy should benefit.

There is a strong, vibrant and diverse tourist economy in South Dorset which welcomes a wide range of visitors every year.

The number of asylum seekers will make up a tiny proportion of the number of people in the area over the summer months. The population of Weymouth is circa 50,000 and that this quadruples in the holiday season. This puts the seasonal population at around 200,000.

The Bibby Stockholm could also potentially help create jobs and support the local economy all of the year around whether through staff and salaries or the requirements from the local supply chain.

The port has a strong vested interest in the safe operation of the facility for its business, local people and the asylum seekers themselves.

Prophecies of doom will become self-fulfilling if misinformation and scaremongering are allowed to have a negative impact on holidaymakers and visitors considering coming to the area.

Is the Bibby Stockholm definitely coming?

Yes. Portland Port is working closely with the Home Office, MAF, and other local partners to prepare for its arrival and operation.

Where can I get more information?

Visit the Portland Port website and social media for Home Office factsheets, MAF weekly updates, our Port Talk newsletter and press releases. It is here: <https://www.portland-port.co.uk/>

