



Portland Port meets with local groups

Portland Port has been holding a series of meetings with councils and community groups about an accommodation facility for asylum seekers, as part of a wider community information and awareness programme.

It has welcomed them into the port to address concerns, provide more information and offer reassurance.

The sessions, including a Home Office representative, have been scheduled as part of a programme of discussion with elected councillors and community representatives.

The meetings come as preparations continue for the safe, secure and successful arrival and operation of the Bibby Stockholm barge.

Bill Reeves, Portland Port chief executive, said: "We are very grateful to our elected representatives, business organisations and local community groups for attending these meetings.

"The sessions are a welcome opportunity to listen to their concerns, answer questions, give clarification and provide more information about the accommodation facility.

"With the Home Office, we started organising most of the meetings some time ago and we aim to keep the lines of communication open with further meetings as well as information on our website and through the media.

"We appreciate that some in the community still have genuine concerns but we hope that people are beginning to understand more about the accommodation facility and the work that is going on to make it a success."

Meetings so far have been held for officers and councillors from Dorset Council, Portland Town Council, Weymouth Town Council, Weymouth and Portland Chamber of Commerce and Weymouth Business Improvement District.

Two of the sessions included input from police elsewhere in the country, who have worked with immigration centres in their area. They heard how, at one site, a group had been set up to act as a gateway co-ordinator for local community groups, faith groups and charities.

Jane Biscombe, Weymouth Town Council Town Clerk said: "Weymouth Town Council members greatly appreciated the opportunity to the talk to Portland Port and the Home Office about some of the concerns and hopes for the future, including ensuring the barge is

implemented in a way which does not prove detrimental to the local area's resources and also treats the asylum seekers with respect.”

Other matters discussed at the various meetings included:

- * Explaining the work of the Multi Agency Forum (MAF), made up of local, regional and national representatives from Dorset Council, local NHS, Dorset Police, public agencies and community organisations which meets 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, through sub-groups linked to the MAF.. The voluntary and community sector group is focused on coordinating the various local community groups, charities and faith groups who may be able to provide support by way of organised activities for the asylum seekers.

- * Selection criteria for those on board, to reduce burden on health services and increase confidence in good behaviour.

- * Value of an organised programme of activities for asylum seekers, potentially including English lessons, sports and voluntary work.

- *Transport out of the port, including taking asylum seekers to locations where activities are being held.

- * Adopting best practice from the Napier accommodation centre in Kent including setting standards of behaviour expected of residents aboard the barge, involving them in the community through voluntary work, and allowing local residents to get to know those aboard better.

- * Importance of the community working together to minimise tensions.

- * Length of time asylum seekers are expected to be aboard while application is processed.

- * Ongoing discussions about health provision by the Home Office and local NHS.

- * Funding for policing, health and Dorset Council.

- * Potential employment for local people by facility operators, and commercial opportunities for local businesses.

Bill said: “Portland Port is committed to minimising the impact of the accommodation facility on local public services and maximising the benefit of its stay.

“We welcome the Minister for Immigration Robert Jenrick’s recent comments about additional funding, including for Dorset Police and Dorset Council, in a House of Commons adjournment debate.

“We look forward to further developing plans with the Home Office and other partners involved in the project over the coming weeks.”

Visit the Portland Port website for more about the plans and a Home Office factsheet about the accommodation facility at <https://www.portland-port.co.uk/>.

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