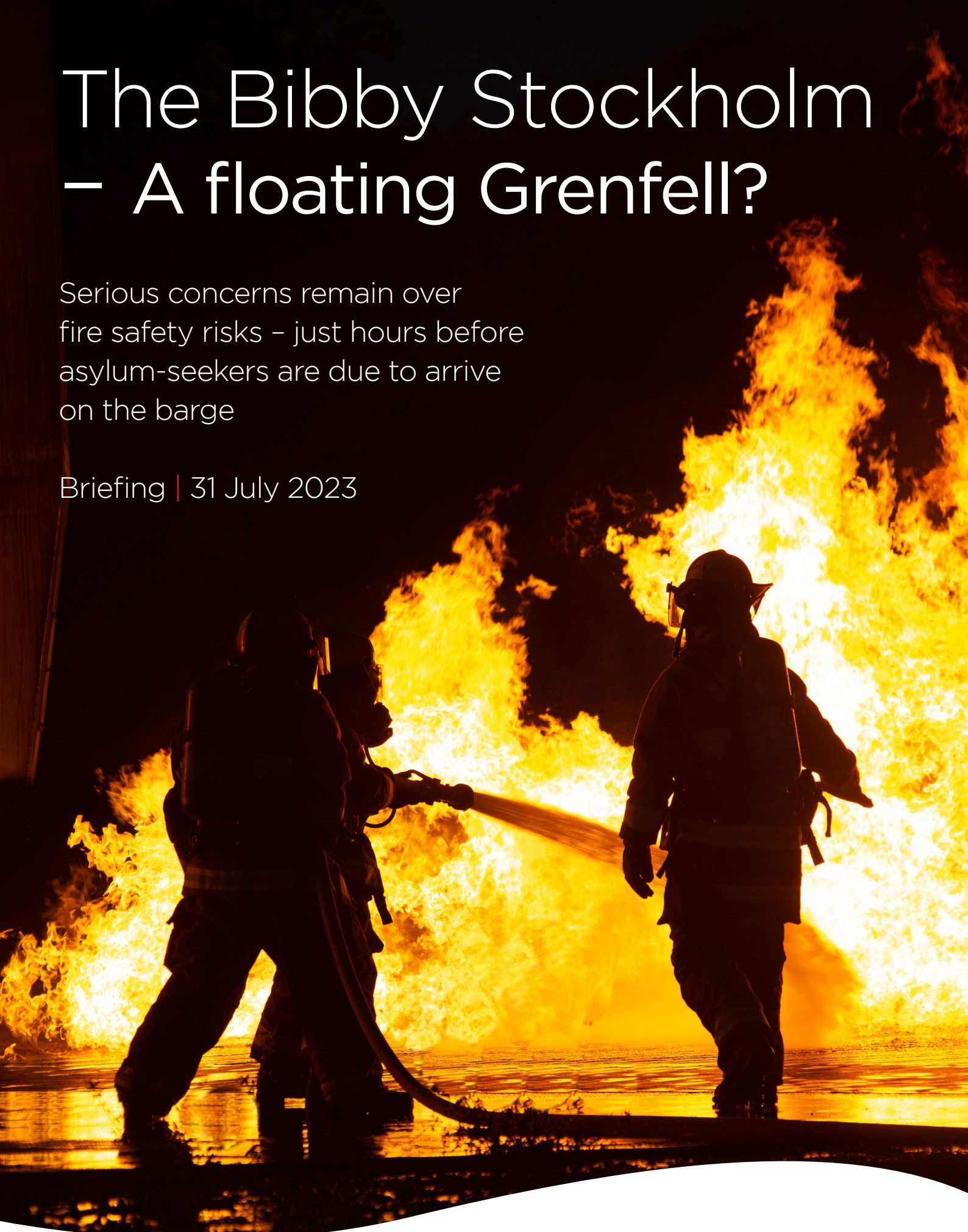


# The Bibby Stockholm – A floating Grenfell?

Serious concerns remain over fire safety risks – just hours before asylum-seekers are due to arrive on the barge

Briefing | 31 July 2023



One life to live

With asylum-seekers due to arrive on the Bibby Stockholm within hours, the barge has yet to pass fire-safety checks. Concerns have been raised from many quarters - and it is difficult to see how the barge could ever hold its full cohort of 546 asylum-seekers and staff.

The Home Office's announcement that it will begin moving asylum-seekers onto Bibby Stockholm despite the barge not passing fire safety checks has been met with shock and dismay due to concerns over serious and unresolved (and potentially unresolvable) safety and fire risks.

### Anonymous letter

In an anonymous letter sent on 27 July to Enver Solomon, chief executive of the Refugee Council, the writer asked:

"Please investigate or ask questions about the fire safety inspections carried out in Dorset on the barge. I heard that the report was **very critical** on a number of safety issues and that it has been **suppressed**."

### Guardian report

On the same day, a [report in the Guardian](#), highlighting safety concerns at the barge, included a statement from Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service which indicated that they were not yet satisfied with arrangements there. They said they had "conducted visits to review fire safety arrangements on the Bibby Stockholm" and were continuing to liaise with other authorities "to ensure that appropriate fire safety measures under relevant legislation are in place". Our own statement from the fire service is on page 7.

### MP's demands

On 18 July it was reported that [Chris Loder MP](#), for West Dorset, had said:

"For months, I have been asking for sight of the safety risk assessments that should have been done to allow the Bibby Stockholm to be used in Portland Harbour... But visibility or assurances that adequate safety risk assessments have been completed have not been received."

Chris Loder has written to home secretary Suella Braverman and transport minister Baroness Vere to ask that they either stop the scheme or provide the necessary safety risk assessments confirming that the vessel can cope with double the weight that it was designed to bear.

### "Grenfell on water, a floating coffin"

In May 2023, a caller named Mark told David Lammy MP [on LBC Radio](#):

"What they are effectively doing here is they are creating a potential Grenfell on water, a floating coffin..."

**"If there is a fire, people will die. In this case, people won't die from the smoke or the flames, they will die from the stampede."**



# The risks

## Overcrowding

Bibby Stockholm was designed to hold 222 people in single cabins, but was recently reconfigured to hold 506 asylum-seekers in multiple-occupancy rooms along with 40 resident staff. A further 20 staff will live off the barge, but a number could be on shift on board at any one time. This means an estimated total of around 550 residents.

This is 248% of the intended capacity – and is greater than the previous maximum of [472](#) asylum-seekers held when the same vessel was used in as an immigration detention centre in Rotterdam in 2005.

Asylum-seekers will share small cabins where individuals will have “less living space than an average parking bay”, according to the [Independent](#). The mayor of Portland [measured the cabins](#) and found that cabins for two people averaged “about 10ft by 12ft”. This could lead to serious problems with exiting rooms, using corridors, and accessing fire exits – and it is not clear whether there are sufficient fire exits for the new, higher population.

Interestingly, on the day that the barge arrived for repairs at Falmouth, owner Bibby Marine changed its [online Bibby Stockholm brochure](#) from stating that the barge accommodated 222 people to “*Bibby Stockholm has 222 cabins and can accommodate up to 506 guests*”. Coincidentally, that is a number which only applies to that recent reconfiguration and has never previously been tested.

It would be interesting to know whether Bibby Marine had checked that the barge could still provide the appropriate number and scale of muster stations, rapid access to fire exits, and other safety measures. Plus, of course, whether they consider themselves legally responsible for backing that number of residents.

## Narrow corridors and stairwells

The exact width of the corridors on board are not publicly known, but following a tour of the barge [the Guardian reported](#) that they are “narrow enough to trail your fingers along both walls as you walk.” Given the excess numbers of people, this could result in deadly delays, bottlenecks, and trampling of fallen people.

## Disorientation

Bibby Stockholm is on three floors and all of the corridors are configured in the same way. There are [no external windows](#) in the corridors, and in an emergency – particularly if smoke and/or dim lighting affect vision – it is easy to imagine that people might have no sense of where they are or which are the bow, stern, port or starboard sides. This could cause delays and increase panic.

## Injuries may impede mobility and escape

Asylum-seekers may have prior injuries relating to war, conflict or persecution, or may sustain injuries as direct result of an incident on the barge. In 2005, when [a fire broke out](#) at a Dutch detention centre in which 11 people died and 15 were injured, one man “suffered injuries to his neck, shoulders and chest when he fell from his bed... in panic after realising that the detention centre was on fire.” Either type of injury could impede escape in a major incident. Additionally, those suffering from the mental trauma of war, conflict or persecution may be less able to process evacuation and safety instructions.

## No lifejackets

Local councillors who visited the barge on 27 July reported that there were [no lifejackets on board](#).

## Windows with restricted opening

The windows on board can be opened, but it is understood that this is restricted and would not allow a person to escape in an emergency.

## Confusion over fire drills

Barge operator Landry & Kling [told journalists](#) on the media day, 21 July, that there would be no fire drills on board Bibby Stockholm.

## Lack of English language

Asylum-speakers whose first language is not English, or who speak no English, may struggle to understand verbal evacuation and safety instructions, especially in a state of panic.

### Reduced muster stations?

Since the barge is to hold 148% more people than intended, some of the public areas will have been converted to sleeping spaces, and this may have reduced the number of muster stations on board. Clarity on this is needed.

### Inadequate and potentially dangerous evacuation area

The only area into which evacuees from the barge could decant is the fenced compound at the head of the berth. This already contains a large security hut and various small structures, and could contain parked vehicles (including the double-decker bus which will convey asylum-seekers off the port).

It is impossible to see how 550 people could congregate in this area, or be counted and verified. The fencing around this compound has been variously described as 15 feet high and 20 feet high – either way, no one could climb over in the event of a seriously overcrowded compound.

The two sets of gates out of the compound would almost certainly be locked, and there is no guarantee that, in an emergency, the security staff on duty would think to unlock the gates before attempting to help with the incident.

### No way to leave the fenced-in jetty

Anyone exiting the barge must be funneled into the compound. There are robust steel fences along the jetty between the barge and the compound which are 5-6 feet high, with sharply pointed tops. No one could scale these, to find an alternative route out, without causing severe injury to themselves.

**There is significant potential for a Hillsborough-type crush situation.**

*Nicola David  
One Life To Live*







### Access for emergency vehicles

Emergency vehicles would need to access the vessel via the compound, and may have difficulty reaching the barge due to large numbers of panicked people crowding into the enclosed area – and the gates could even be locked.

### Physical condition

Bibby Stockholm was built in 1976, making it 47 years old. According to a recent [FT article](#):

“The hull was rotten... in places the steel hull had decayed to the point where it was dangerously thin, necessitating the replacement of entire sections... Bibby Stockholm was late out of Falmouth for good reasons, mostly age-related.”

The repair work done at Falmouth may have fixed the localised problems, and the barge may (as the FT found) have passed its Lloyd’s inspections, but the rot and repairs may have undermined the overall structural integrity of the hull (who wants to drive a car after a head-on motorway crash, even if it has been repaired?).

This could leave the barge open to being adversely affected by extreme weather, including being knocked against the berth, or by the weight of the additional residents plus the commensurate additional furniture and stores.

### Complexity around safety

The fact that the barge scheme straddles both water and land means that safety inspections and certification become more complex and potentially confusing. At least 5 agencies are involved here:

1. Lloyd’s Register of Shipping
2. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency
3. Dorset Council, which regulates the safety of the barge
4. The Health & Safety Executive (HSE), which regulates the surrounding quayside
5. Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service.

### Visit by the HSE

It is known that during the week commencing 24 July, the HSE visited the berth at Portland Port. It found that “a lot” of work was still required to be done by Bibby Marine (the barge’s owner) and Landry & Kling, the US-based subcontractor for operations.

### Landry & Kling

Co-founder Joyce Landry has claimed in an interview in [The Herald](#) that “fears about the conditions on board have been caused by a lack of accurate information,” and that Bibby Stockholm is “**actually quite lovely**”.

# Comment

## Fire safety on Bibby Stockholm in the Netherlands

In an undercover report of conditions aboard Bibby Stockholm when it was used as a detention facility in the Netherlands, Robert van de Griend found that many guards “have **no idea what the procedure is in the event of a fire.**” He also reported that during a fire drill, “Guards did not know which emergency numbers to dial” and “detainees were locked in the cell right next to the scene of the fire.”

[Undercover op de illegalenboot](#) by Robert van de Griend at *Vrij Nederland*, 25 March 2006

**Bibby Stockholm feels like a disaster waiting to happen.**

*Nicola David*

## One Life To Live

“All of my research, and everyone I’ve spoken to, indicates that the overcrowding on the barge, and the rot found in the hull during its time in dry dock, **render the barge entirely unsafe from the point of view of additional weight and inherent fire risks.**”

“Add to this the extremely narrow corridors, windows that can’t be used for escape, no lifejackets, no fire drills, and a tiny and inescapable evacuation compound surrounded by insurmountable fencing and locked gates.

“In an emergency, the sense of panic could only be heightened by smoke, potentially dim emergency lighting, disorientation, and – for those without sufficient English – an inability to respond to verbal instructions.

“**I can’t see how everyone could get off the barge,** or be immediately safe once off the barge, in the event of a serious fire or a sudden ingress of water.

**Nicola David**  
Founder

## The Refugee Council

“**These reports are deeply concerning.** Like most people in the UK, we believe people seeking asylum – the vast majority of whom are refugees fleeing unimaginable horrors – should be treated with decency, respect and humanity. These are values people in Britain hold dear.

“The appalling handling of the backlog of cases – a combination of chaos and cost entirely of the government’s own making – is leading to dreadful situations such as these.

“We have practical answers to the challenges in the asylum system – we urge ministers to grip this situation and work for constructive ways forward, not these dreadful sticking plaster solutions which tarnish Britain’s reputation in the world and cause untold human misery.”

**Mark Davies**  
Head of Communications and Campaigns

# Statement from Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service

“Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service have visited the Bibby Stockholm as part of our familiarisation and training programme.

“Where any aspect falls within the scope of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order, we will be undertaking appropriate audits of the vessel to confirm that adequate general fire precautions are in place. We have provided advice and comment in relation to fire safety arrangements to both Home Office and the operators of the vessel during our familiarisation and pre-occupation visits and will continue to do so throughout the time that the vessel is in occupation. We are in discussion to ensure that where necessary, fire drills are undertaken for staff and residents to ensure that the emergency evacuation plan can be implemented.

“Fire safety arrangements on board the vessel include addressable fire detection and alarm system; a limited suppression system in the galley/kitchen and machinery spaces; and fire extinguishers and hose reels for initial firefighting attack by trained staff.

“Passive fire safety measures include self-closing fire doors and fire resisting construction to the means of escape. Staff will be on board to assist any evacuation, and measures are in place to limit the ignition sources and combustible storage on board.

“The fire risk assessment is the appropriate mechanism for determining the planning, organisation, management and control of the fire safety measures, and responsibility rests with the vessel operator - under their contract with the Home Office - to produce and keep this document under review as the risk changes.

“We do not conduct fire risk assessments or provide an approval process prior to occupation of a premises, but will exercise our enforcement powers (either formal or informal) to address any significant areas of non-compliance where necessary.

“I hope that this provides some reassurance that the safety of occupants is being treated as the highest priority.”

# One life to live

One Life to Live believes that refugees and asylum-seekers deserve better than Britain's hostile environment. It works collaboratively with charities, NGOs and other organisations to challenge public preconceptions of asylum and refugee issues, to campaign against large-scale accommodation containment sites, and to shine the light on different perspectives within these stories.

Founder Nicola David was a member of the [Linton-on-Ouse Action Group](#) which fought off government plans for the first such site in 2022.

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