

## Institutional Asylum Accommodation: camps, barracks & barges

### Overview

Asylum Matters believes that *people seeking asylum in the UK should be housed in communities, not camps*. It is essential that institutional accommodation camps on barracks and barges are closed, and the Government focuses its efforts on widening asylum dispersal in the UK; providing resources and tools to communities to house people seeking asylum in safe and dignified accommodation, rather than creating punitive, segregated containment sites which restrict people's basic human rights.

### Background

- The current 'crisis' in the asylum accommodation system is due to the failure of the Home Office to make timely decisions; recent reforms in the [Nationality & Borders Act](#) and [Illegal Migration Act](#); and a lack of partnership working with local communities by the Home Office and its providers.
- From 2021, as well as increased use of unsuitable hotel accommodation (with costs rising to [£8million per day](#) according to the Home Office's 2023 annual report), the Government has sought to develop a national portfolio of large-scale asylum 'accommodation centres' in which to place people seeking asylum in the UK.
- New sites have included the [Bibby Stockholm barge in Dorset](#) (already costing the taxpayer [over £22million](#)) and the ex-military barracks at [RAF Wethersfield in Essex](#). Despite reports of [inhumane living conditions](#) and significant community tensions at operational sites, the Home Office continues its development of ex-RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire whilst a facility in Bexhill in East Sussex is also in scope for development.
- Such facilities [cause lasting harm](#) and have resulted in conditions best [described as quasi-detention](#), according to a parliamentary inquiry that found they replicate many of the features of immigration detention centres.

### The harm caused by segregated containment sites

In his [statement to the House of Commons in March 2023](#), then-Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick told MPs that the use of these sites would help reduce the need to rely on private hotels, and that the **'Government would not elevate the wellbeing of illegal migrants above the British people'**.

The Home Office first placed people seeking asylum on the **Bibby Stockholm barge in Dorset** in August 2023, with those on board [describing the conditions](#) as **'unsafe', 'frightening'**, and responsible for driving one person to attempt **suicide**. After removing people from the barge due to the [detection](#) of the **deadly legionella bacteria**, people seeking asylum were placed back on the barge in October, despite ongoing [legal challenges](#) and **fire safety concerns**. It was revealed in December 2023 that costs for the barge had [risen to almost £22.5 million](#), with no current 'value for money assessment' completed.

In December 2023, campaigners' worst fears were realised when there was a **death onboard** the Bibby Stockholm barge, as 27-year-old [Leonard Farraku tragically lost his life](#) in an apparent **suicide**.

People seeking asylum started being moved on to the ex-military barracks at **RAF Wethersfield in Essex** [in July 2023](#). There have since been various reports concerning the poor conditions on site, including of [an outbreak](#) of **scabies**, [protests](#), the [reported denial of emergency medical aid](#), and **enforced isolation** of [those in need of mental health support](#). A December 2023 [report titled 'Ghettoised and Traumatised'](#) by Helen Bamber Foundation & Humans For Rights Network provided evidence of **significant harm** and **deteriorating mental health** amongst people at Wethersfield, including **suicidal ideation** and **self-harm**; the isolated and detention-like site being a contributing factor. This followed a [wealth of research](#) evidencing the harm inflicted on people seeking asylum in institutional accommodation [of all kinds](#).

[Persistent concerns](#) at all such sites include a **lack of effective screening processes and safeguards**, high levels of **self-harm** or **suicidal ideation**, lack of privacy and **sleep deprivation** caused by shared facilities, geographical and **social isolation** experienced by residents, concerns around quality of food, a **lack of healthcare** and access to **legal advice**, and severe consequences for people's **mental health**.

These segregated sites do not only cause harm to the people contained within them, but also to **community cohesion** in the areas which they are situated. The segregated nature of the sites has made them attractive to **extremist groups** and activists seeking to grow their following. Hope Not Hate [recorded 253 'visits'](#) to contingency asylum accommodation by **far right activists** and groups in 2022, including an increasing number of **direct attacks from anti-migrant activists** including daily **harassment** of people placed there. This marked a 102% increase on the year before. Organised far right groups, including **neo-Nazi activists**, have sought to **infiltrate** and co-opt community campaigns in opposition to such sites, **inflaming local tensions**.

## Conclusion

**Many people seeking asylum are being warehoused in hotels, ex-military sites or large initial accommodation centres for long periods of time.** The defining characteristic of this 'institutional' accommodation is that it has features, such as shared facilities, set mealtimes or security restrictions, which mean that people who live there cannot exercise full agency over their lives and their day-to-day activities. Placing people in such settings also results in them being segregated from the local communities around them.

**People need safety, privacy and stability in order to rebuild their lives.** Institutional accommodation prevents this, and often leads to poor mental and physical health outcomes, and re-traumatisation for vulnerable people. People who have lived in such accommodation describe feeling as if they live *'in a place like prison'*. They describe poor quality food; difficulties accessing essential healthcare; a lack of access to education and activities for children; deteriorating mental health; harassment by the far right and accommodation that is unclean, unsuitable and unsafe.

**These facilities, if allowed to continue, risk permanently instituting large prison-like refugee camps in the UK** that; significantly blur the line between freedom and detention, segregate people seeking asylum, and lead to community tensions and more clear targets for far-right activity. They will continue to harm people, and they will do so at substantial cost.

- People seeking asylum should be housed in communities, not camps. The Government should **immediately end the use of segregated containment sites**, close all camps on barracks and barges and drop plans for further large-scale sites that have no place in a humane and effective asylum system.
- The Government must **make a full commitment to housing people seeking asylum in communities**, focusing its efforts on providing resources and tools to communities to house people seeking asylum in safe and dignified accommodation that aids their integration.
- The Government should **prioritise the quick and fair processing of asylum claims** to reduce the amount of time people are forced to stay in asylum accommodation.
- The Government must **commit to a vision of a fair and efficient asylum system which protects the right to asylum in the UK and allows people who seek sanctuary to safely rebuild their lives** as part of our communities.

*Asylum Matters is a registered charity working locally and nationally to address systematic issues in the asylum system and advocate for positive change. Our five regional representatives work in North East England, North West England, the West Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber, and Wales. For further information, contact your [regional representative](#) or [info@asylummatters.org](mailto:info@asylummatters.org).*