

Institutional Asylum Accommodation: camps, barracks & barges

Overview

People seeking asylum in the UK should be housed in communities, not camps. It is essential that camps, barracks and barges where people are currently placed are closed. The Government should focus 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 under the previous Government to make timely decisions; 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 [£8mn per day](#) according to the Home Office's 2023 annual report), the previous Government sought to develop a national portfolio of large-scale asylum 'accommodation centres' in which to place people seeking asylum in the UK.
- Such sites included the [Bibby Stockholm barge in Dorset](#) (already costing the taxpayer [over £22mn](#)) and the ex-military barracks at [RAF Wethersfield in Essex](#). Currently, RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire remains in scope for development. A site in Bexhill in East Sussex may be in scope for development as an immigration detention facility.
- These facilities [cause lasting harm](#), result in very poor mental health outcomes, damage community cohesion by acting as magnets for far-right activity as well as segregating and othering people seeking asylum from our communities, and exhibit conditions [described as quasi-detention](#) by an all-party inquiry.

The harm caused by segregated containment sites

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

Despite the new Government's [announcement](#) that the use of the Bibby Stockholm barge will not extend beyond January 2025, people seeking asylum remain on board in '**prison-like**' [conditions](#) and continue to be held at the equally **harmful** and [even more expensive](#) camp at **RAF Wethersfield in Essex**. People seeking asylum started being moved to the ex-military barracks [in July 2023](#). There have since been numerous 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](#).

There is not only a [wealth of research](#) evidencing [the harm](#) inflicted on people seeking asylum in institutional accommodation [of all kinds](#), there is also an **overwhelming body of evidence documenting the harm** caused by camp-style sites like Wethersfield.

A December 2023 [report titled 'Ghettoised and Traumatised'](#) by Helen Bamber Foundation ([HBF](#)) & Humans For Rights Network ([HFRN](#)) 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.

A May 2024 [report titled 'Like a Prison: No Control, No Sleep'](#) by Médecins sans Frontières ([MSF](#)) and Doctors of the World ([DOTW](#)) called for the immediate closure of Wethersfield and an end to camp-style accommodation. They found **74%** of people presented with **severe psychological distress** and **41%** experiencing **suicidal ideation** as well as deliberate self-harm and suicide attempts. They reported **between 5 and 10 suicide attempts** at Wethersfield in January 2024 alone, and described the acute mental health crisis, **harm and trauma** perpetuated by the **prison-like conditions**.

A further report by HBF and HFRN in June 2024 titled [‘At What Cost? The ongoing harm caused to men seeking asylum held in Wethersfield’](#) revealed the **deepening mental health crisis** at the site with increasing numbers of people self-harming and attempting suicide. Home Office data revealed **30 occurrences of self-harm or attempted suicide**, 91 occurrences of expression of suicidal ideation and over **160 safeguarding referrals** regarding suicide and self-harm in the first three months of 2024 alone.

[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**, severe consequences for people’s **mental health**, and **‘hopelessness caused by boredom’** which inevitably **leads to harm** according to the [since-sacked](#) Independent Chief Inspector for Borders and Immigration.

These sites, which amount to **racial segregation** according to a June 2024 [report by the Runnymede Trust and Care4Calais](#), 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**. Institutional asylum accommodation sites act as **magnets for the far-right** by othering and segregating people from our communities, creating distance and space for misinformation to thrive and hatred to grow, [as evidenced by](#) the **recent spate of violent attacks** including attempts to **burn down hotels with asylum seekers trapped inside** in [August 2024](#).

Furthermore, the **financial cost** of these large-scale sites has been eye-watering. The National Audit Office (NAO) published its [‘Investigation into asylum accommodation’](#) in March 2024 which found the large sites programme was expected to cost **£1.2 billion**, roughly the GDP of Grenada. Rather than delivering the cost-savings promised, these sites are costing **£46 million more** than the use of hotels. In May 2024, the House of Commons’ Public Accounts Committee (PAC) published its report [‘Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership’](#). It found the Home Office **‘made unacceptable and avoidable mistakes’** in its rush to establish large-scale accommodation sites such as RAF Wethersfield and RAF Scampton and **‘failed to protect value for money’**, with costs spiralling to **£46m** at the former and **£27m** at the latter after the Home Office forecast they would only cost £5m each to set up.

Conclusion

People seeking asylum need safety, privacy and stability in order to rebuild their lives. Instead, many are being warehoused in hotels, ex-military sites or large initial accommodation centres for long periods of time. 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 attract far-right activity that damages community cohesion. These sites will continue to harm people, and they will do so at substantial cost to taxpayers.

- 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 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 the North East, North West, West Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber, and Wales. **For further information and support with raising this issue in Parliament:** contact your [regional representative](#) or info@asylummatters.org.