

Briefing on RAF Wethersfield, December 2024

12 months ago, [Humans for Rights Network](#) (HFRN) and the [Helen Bamber Foundation](#) (HBF) published [a report with detailed evidence](#) from medical assessments and casework with over 100 men showing that the government's use of Wethersfield airbase as a large 'open-prison camp' for men seeking asylum was causing profound harm. Many men moved there were extremely vulnerable and the Home Office had itself recognised that this type of accommodation was unsuitable for those people - including survivors of torture and trafficking and those who had severe mental health issues.

The men in Wethersfield had displayed symptoms of worsening mental health following transfer, including low mood, loneliness, flashbacks, reduced appetite, weight loss, feelings of despair and difficulty sleeping, and a worsening in symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. They reported anxiety and depression, suicidal ideation, intense desperation and fear, self-harm, and acute sleep deprivation. When one man shared his suicidal thoughts with members of staff at the site, he was simply told that it was "normal in this environment".

Camp-style accommodation harms mental health

The very features of Wethersfield cause significant mental distress, including:

- Isolation: Wethersfield's remote location and restricted access exacerbates feelings of detachment from society, while the lack of adequate facilities heighten tensions onsite
- Detention-like setting: The camp's resemblance to a prison, with barbed wire and surveillance, triggers traumatic experiences among residents, many of whom have had experiences of other 'camps', for example in Egypt and Libya.
- Lack of privacy and shared facilities: crowded living conditions significantly impact mental health.

Our follow up report, ['At What Cost?'](#), in June 2024 showed that very little had changed in Wethersfield and that increasing numbers of men were reporting suicidal ideation, incidents of self-harm, and suicide attempts. Home Office data showed that in the first three months of 2024 there were over 160 safeguarding referrals made regarding men at risk of suicide and self-harm.

"I have attempted suicide personally because of the conditions of the camp. Once I tried to hang myself and once there was a group of us six or seven people tried to set ourselves on fire, they didn't let us in the camp and extinguished the fire, I had a part of my T-shirt burnt, many others as well, it has affected our mental health in a very bad way..." Salman, from Iran

The longer men are held in Wethersfield, with little to do and growing feelings of desperation, the more tensions rise and there is a risk of violence. The Home Office Safeguarding Hub regularly received referrals regarding men who were refusing to eat, or who had been the victims of assault. Yet, not only did the Home Office continue to move more people into Wethersfield, it also amended its 'Allocation of Asylum Accommodation' policy to make it much *harder* to move vulnerable people out of the site, despite the harm being caused to their mental health. This led to a significant drop in the number of men who were moved out of the camp.

Access to justice

Much of the anxiety experienced before July was the result of ongoing uncertainty about what is happening with the men in Wethersfield's asylum claims. Under the new Labour government, men are now finally having their substantive asylum interviews, but this brings a new raft of concerns given that Wethersfield is in a legal advice desert, and there are significant problems onsite, including no information regarding law firms with capacity provided; no financial or logistical support provided for men to travel to legal appointments; insufficient private spaces or access to computer equipment or Wi-Fi; and no privacy - men are forced to disclose private matters in an environment that they are likely to be overheard. Men are attending asylum interviews having never spoken to a lawyer or received any legal advice.

The cost of cruelty

Wethersfield was initially proposed as a temporary site for asylum accommodation for 12 months, but in March 2024 the Home Office laid a 'Special Development Order' to extend the use of the site for a further three years. The use of Wethersfield between 2023-24 to 2026-27 is [due to cost £338.7 million](#). The site can accommodate up to 1,700 but the Home Office decided to cap the regular occupancy at 800 in light of "local concerns, mitigating impacts, and managing the sites safely." Putting aside the ongoing risk of using this accommodation, in terms of people's health, it is hard to see how spending over £100 million a year on a site that will ordinarily house 800 people could ever be seen as value for money.

Conclusion

An isolated living environment, lack of privacy, lack of access to healthcare, legal services and community support, and the lack of assessment of vulnerability and risk are just some of the reasons why placing people in camp accommodation on ex-military sites is an inhumane way to treat those seeking protection. It causes additional pain and trauma to people who have already experienced conflict, oppression, abuse, torture and trafficking. The Home Office is taking a real and unnecessary risk in continuing to accommodate men in Wethersfield.

There have been several positive developments under the Labour government, including decisions to scrap the Rwanda plan; to not open Scampton; to close Bibby Stockholm; and the decision to progress the asylum claims that had been put on hold due the Illegal Migration Act 2023. However, there is currently no firm plan or timeline for the closure of Wethersfield, despite the Prime Minister [committing to do so](#) before the general election.

"This place is like a prison. It is a military place and I have a trauma from anything to do with the military. Our freedom is limited here. We can only leave using the buses. If we miss the bus we can't go out or back in. The treatment has been very bad for a long time. The medical staff are not cooperative, they don't seem to care. They ask you to book an appointment and after that they only give you painkillers. I am not doing well in this place. I feel like I am a war prisoner. I have lost my humanity and dignity. I feel humiliated. In Wethersfield I feel that I lost my privacy and freedom. I am sharing a room with five others and this is disturbing my sleep. I can't sleep as not all of us have the same sleep pattern. There are regular fights and because of that I stay in my room most of the time."

Case study

Rabat arrived in the UK by small boat in mid 2024 and was transferred to Wethersfield a few days later. He was not informed that he was to be transferred to Wethersfield, nor was any health screening conducted prior to his transfer. Upon arrival at the site, Rabat was not told how long he would have to remain there and was acutely distressed by the environment and living conditions.

Rabat contacted Humans for Rights Network (HFRN) in September 2024 stating that he was unable to sleep and was experiencing a significant decline in his mental health as a result of having to live in Wethersfield. He was very clear that it was the conditions of the ex-military site that were directly causing this decline and that moving to different accommodation was essential to protect his health. These concerns were raised by Rabat with onsite medical providers and Home Office contractor staff.

Despite a Pre-Action Protocol letter being sent by HFRN on Rabat's behalf raising the serious deterioration of his mental health, as well as his past trauma that should immediately result in his transfer from Wethersfield, no action was taken to protect him and arrange alternative accommodation. By mid-October Rabat was experiencing suicidal ideation and HFRN was immediately concerned for his safety. An immediate safeguarding referral was sent to the relevant contractors and the Home Office, raising these concerns. However, no action was taken.

It was only after Rabat was referred to a solicitor, and obtained evidence from an independent doctor, that he was eventually transferred from Wethersfield to alternative accommodation. This case is yet another example of the Home Office and its contractors failing to take seriously health concerns when raised directly by an individual. Wethersfield is acutely harmful and it is the view of HFRN that had Rabat not been transferred, he may have died by or been seriously harmed by suicide.

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