

## Asylum accommodation in RAF Wethersfield – two years on

18 months ago, the Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) [published detailed evidence](#) from medical assessments and casework showing that the government's use of Wethersfield airbase as a large 'open-prison camp' for men seeking asylum since July 2023 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. **This harm has continued and been regularly evidenced by organisations working with men at the site.**

Although the Labour government has closed the Bibby Stockholm barge; abandoned plans to open a new accommodation centre in RAF Scampton; and will [close Napier Barracks](#) in September 2025, there is currently no plan for the closure of Wethersfield. This is despite the Prime Minister [making a clear commitment to do so](#) before the general election. **Wethersfield is not only harmful, but also extremely expensive – in the second half of 2024 it [cost over £30 million a year](#) to accommodate just over 600 people.**

### 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 heightens tensions onsite
- **Detention-like setting:** The camp's resemblance to a prison, with barbed wire and surveillance, triggers traumatic memories 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.

HBF has assessed men in Wethersfield who have suffered from anxiety and depression, suicidal ideation and self-harm, and have experienced a worsening in their symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. 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". Our follow up report, '[At What Cost?](#)', in June 2024 showed 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. A [recent report](#) from Doctors of the World and Médecins Sans Frontières found that in 2023 and 2024, 62% of those accessing their health clinic presented with severe mental distress and 30% reported suicidal ideation.

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 has regularly received referrals regarding men who were refusing to eat, or who had been the victims of assault. Yet, not only has the Home Office continued 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 caused to their mental health. This led to a significant drop in the number of men who were moved out of the camp.

### Men moved in and out of Wethersfield

In the second half of 2024, 624 men seeking asylum were transferred to, and accommodated at Wethersfield.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these were from Afghanistan (120 – 19%), Syria (118 – 19%), Iran (91 – 15%) and Eritrea (78 – 13%). Of the 624 men moved to Wethersfield, over a third (224) were moved into different accommodation. Just a handful of these (38) were moved because they were 'unsuitable' for that accommodation (for example, they were victims of torture or trafficking or have complex health needs). This is likely in part due to the fact that since the Summer of 2024 some have had their substantive asylum interviews whilst in Wethersfield. This has meant that others have chosen to remain at the site rather than request to be moved because they also want to have their interview and do not want to risk delaying the consideration of their asylum claim. It is also in part due to the Home Office increasing the threshold for being moved out of large sites/forced room-sharing in 2024.

Revised Home Office Policy, introduced in February 2024, places a significant evidential burden on survivors of torture and/or trafficking (and, in fact, any vulnerable asylum seeker) to show that they are unsuitable for being accommodated at Wethersfield. They must provide "*verifiable, professional or expert evidence*" such as detailed healthcare records, evidence of ongoing treatment or personalised assessments and/or psychiatric evidence setting out their specific individual needs. This is despite the widely documented challenges men at the site face in accessing independent quality health care. Furthermore, even when they do access evidence from a specialist organisation such as HBF or Doctors of the World, the Home Office runs this evidence by its own 'Independent Medical Advisor' who frequently dismisses it. The Home Office's Medical Advisors provide their opinion based on desktop assessment of the evidence provided, i.e. they do not speak to or meet the individual involved. HBF has assessed a number of men this year whose mental and physical health was significantly impacted by them being moved to Wethersfield – in each case, the Home Office Medical Advisor wrongly advised they should not be moved.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom of Information Request Reference: FOI2025/03210, answered by the Home Office on 9th April 2025

### Case study

*HBF was instructed by this individual's lawyer to provide a medical assessment of their suitability to be accommodated in Wethersfield. A Doctors of the World (DOTW) Report had already been provided which had been reviewed by NowMedical, the Home Office's 'independent medical adviser'.*

Ahmad (name has been changed) has a history of torture by government officials in his country of origin who had killed two of his immediate family members. He has been beaten by his torturers and permanently injured with shears. Following his escape from his home country, he had received treatment in hospital for several months for these injuries owing to their severity. Ahmad experienced ongoing debilitating pain as a result of his torture. He had witnessed violence from other residents which he found deeply troubling.

Ahmad had been reviewed by Doctors of the World (DOTW) on site, as well as the on-site GP. His DOTW assessment had recommended his severe pain be reviewed, noting multiple sites of scarring and his torture injuries as well as detailing his account of torture. His psychological distress was also noted. His GP had referred him for x-rays for his pain but he had been offered no treatment for it other than paracetamol/ibuprofen. He had been diagnosed with depression and was prescribed anti-depressant medication but it was evident to the HBF doctor reviewing his treatment that had not been informed about the correct use of his medication.

An assessment had been conducted by NowMedical of Ahmad (reviewed by an HBF clinician as part of their suitability assessment) which was extremely brief and based on a desk review of documents. NowMedical had not seen Ahmad in person. They recommended Ahmad continue to be accommodated in Wethersfield as his needs could reasonably be met there.

When assessed by an HBF doctor, she diagnosed him with severe depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with symptoms including visual hallucinations noted by the doctor. She noted the clear inadequacy of his medical treatment thus far both for his mental health issues and his severe musculoskeletal pain and recommended his immediate and urgent move to suitable accommodation. The doctor, in particular, noted that the NowMedical Assessment had concerningly not linked his ongoing health concerns with his account of torture, nor referenced his amputated body part. It is deeply concerning that the ongoing 'quasi-detention' of such a vulnerable individual was justified on the basis of such brief, ill-evidenced and incomplete advice. A week after HBF's suitability assessment was sent to the Home Office, they confirmed Ahmad would be moved out of Wethersfield on suitability grounds.

## Safeguarding concerns

Significant safeguarding concerns remain in Wethersfield. Data acquired by HBF shows that there were 393 safeguarding referrals made in the first three months of 2025:

- 35 were regarding suicide or self-harm
- 90 were regarding violent/disruptive behaviour
- 141 were regarding 'missing individuals'
- 31 were regarding physical health and
- 51 referrals were regarding victims of torture and trafficking.<sup>2</sup>

## Access to justice

Part of the anxiety experienced by men in Wethersfield before July 2024 was the result of ongoing uncertainty about what was happening with their asylum claims, which had been put 'on hold'. Under the Labour government, men started having their substantive asylum interviews – from July to December 2024, 283 men received a substantive interview for their asylum claim. However, this has brought a [new raft of concerns](#) given that **Wethersfield is in a legal advice desert, and there is no support other than 'sign-posting' for men to find legal representatives**. While steps have been taken to address the need for asylum interviews to take place on site private spaces and provide sufficient private spaces and equipment, private rooms often do not have Wi-Fi and many of the men accommodated at Wethersfield who have limited mobile data on their phones and few means to obtain more. **Men are attending asylum interviews having never spoken to a lawyer or received any legal advice.**

It is also unclear what is happening to Syrian nationals in Wethersfield, for whom decision making in their asylum claims [has been paused](#) for the past six months and who will be feeling increasing desperation at the uncertainty of their situation. The maximum length of stay for individual at Wethersfield is ["usually nine months"](#).

## 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."

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<sup>2</sup> Freedom of Information Request Reference: FOI2025/04665, answered by the Home Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2025

In January and February 2025 there were just over 560 people accommodated at the site.<sup>3</sup> Putting aside the ongoing risk of using this accommodation, in terms of people's health, it is hard to see how spending over tens of millions a year on a site housing under 600 people could ever been seen as value for money.

## Conclusion

*"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 (supported by Humans for Rights Network)

An isolated living environment, lack of privacy, lack of access to adequate healthcare and legal services, 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 an unnecessary and hugely expensive risk in continuing to accommodate men in Wethersfield.

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<sup>3</sup> Freedom of Information Request Reference: FOI2025/03210, answered by the Home Office on 9th April 2025