HELEN BAMBER FOUNDATION
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Asylum accommodation in ex-military large sites

November 2026

Introduction

Since the government started using ex-military sites as asylum accommodation six years ago, NGOs, parliamentary committees and other have repeatedly raised concerns about the harm this accommodation can cause to those moved there. Key themes include:

- Isolation: Remote locations and restricted access exacerbate feelings of detachment from society, while the lack of adequate facilities and sense of being trapped heighten tensions.
- Detention-like setting: Resemblance to a prison, with barbed wire and surveillance, triggers traumatic memories among residents who have experienced other 'camps', for example in Egypt and Libya. The military setting also poses a high risk of re-trauma for those who have fled war or regimes that practice brutal military conscription.
- Lack of privacy and shared facilities: Crowded living conditions significantly impact mental health. Chronic sleep deprivation is pervasive.
- Inadequate access to healthcare and legal advice.

Despite Keir Starmer committing to the closure of RAF Wethersfield, the Labour government extended its use. In January 2026 it opened a new large site in Crowborough Training Camp in East Sussex. In June 2026, it announced it was exploiring the use three further former Ministry of Defence (MOD) sites - MOD Bicester (Oxford), MOD Barnham (Suffolk) and MOD Linton-on-Ouse (North Yorkshire) - which could together accommodate approximately 3,750 people, subject to feasibility assessments, planning permission and other necessary approvals. Meanwhile, the government is seeking to extend the use of Crowborough until 2030 and Wethersfield beyond 2027. Capacity at Wethersfield will expand to over 1,245.

Napier barracks was the first ex-military site to be used, opened in 2020 (and closed in 2025). Two years after its opening, in his re-inspection of Napier Barracks, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) stated that he was *"still looking for evidence that the Home Office has introduced a template for the standing up of future sites that incorporates the lessons learned from Napier..."* In his 2024 report on asylum accommodation, the ICIBI lamented that the Home Office had not learned those lessons. If it had, it might have responded "*more efficiently and effectively to some of the operational challenges faced at Wethersfield and the Bibby Stockholm barge, including ensuring regulatory compliance... and providing purposeful activities for the residents as well as support for their mental wellbeing.*" While some positive changes were eventually made in Wethersfield, they followed months of attempted engagement by NGOs and others, alongside legal challenges.

As the government looks to open even more ex-military sites, we are concerned that significant lessons have still not been learned. This briefing looks at the existing evidence on large sites; suggests questions that need to be addressed; and makes recommendations for change.

Assessing risk and impact on mental health

The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF), Doctors of the World (DOTW) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have 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". HBF's 2024 report, 'At What Cost?', showed increasing numbers of men were reporting suicidal ideation, incidents of self-harm, and suicide attempts, with 160 safeguarding referrals made regarding men at risk of suicide and self-harm in a three month period. In 2025, 393 safeguarding referrals were made in the first three months. A report from DOTW and MSF found that in 2023 and 2024, 62% of those accessing their health clinic presented with severe mental distress and 30% reported suicidal ideation.

It has long been recognised that survivors of torture and trafficking should not be forced to share rooms or accommodated in large sites where this could trigger trauma, compromise their sense of safety and hinder their psychological recovery. Yet, in February 2024, the Home Office revised its accommodation allocation policy, significantly increasing the evidential burden on survivors and other vulnerable asylum seekers to demonstrate that they were unsuitable for this type of accommodation.[1] This is despite the widely documented challenges men at existing sites have faced in accessing independent quality health care.

In May 2026, following a successful legal challenge brought by the Helen Bamber Foundation and Freedom from Torture, the High Court found that the Home Office had acted unlawfully in making these policy changes, having failed to consult the organisations or adequately assess the impact on survivors. In July 2026, the Home Office restored the previous protective policy position for survivors of torture and other serious violence, people being assessed or treated by HBF or Freedom from Torture, and certain people with serious mental health conditions. These groups are again considered unsuitable for accommodation in ex-MOD sites, vessels and room-sharing arrangements.

However, effective implementation remains essential. Vulnerability must be identified at the point of allocation and assessed on an ongoing basis, with appropriate access to trained professionals and prompt action where accommodation is found to be unsuitable. This requires onsite support and trained professionals able to assess risk and respond appropriately.

[1] 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 specific individual needs.

Access to legal advice

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. However, this brought a new raft of concerns given that Wethersfield is in a legal advice desert, and there is no support other than 'sign-posting' from Migrant Help for men to find legal representatives. In both Crowborough and Wethersfield, men have had to attend their substantive asylum interviews having never spoken to a lawyer or received any legal advice.

Despite the contract for Wethersfield making clear that part of the support that should be available included "enabling reasonable visits to site from legal representatives", sufficient equipment and private spaces were only made available months after interviews had resumed. Furthermore, in Wethersfield and Crowborough private rooms have often not had Wi-Fi and many of the men have no phones and/are limited or no internet access.

Official correspondence to both sites has been often severely delayed or sent to email addresses the men do not know how to access. This lack of communication means that men are missing critical deadlines for their legal cases.

Initially when men in Wethersfield started to have asylum interviews, they had to travel to London to do so (even though those interviews would still usually be conducted remotely, with the individual at the Home Office and the interviewer taking part by video call). Eventually the Home Office introduced private spaces at Wethersfield so that residents need not travel to London but it should not have taken months for such changes to be made.

Use of large sites brings large numbers of people needing asylum legal advice together in one location, very often an advice desert. It is by its nature likely to compound problems with access to legal advice. Advice provided remotely is not suitable for more vulnerable people seeking asylum, and still requires legal representatives to have capacity.

Access to services and support

In February 2024, the previous ICIBI, David Neal, wrote to the Home Secretary to raise concerns about the men in Wethersfield and the "*overwhelming feeling of hopelessness caused by boredom, which invariably, in my experience, leads to violence*". He warned that increasing the numbers accommodated at the site would significantly increase the risk of a serious incident affecting the safety and wellbeing of staff, contractors and residents. The Home Office then recognised that the capping of regular occupancy in Wethersfield to 800 was necessary to "managing the sites safely", with additional capacity retained for contingency purposes. The Home Office now intends to use all 1,245 bedspaces throughout the year. This proposed expansion, representing an

increase of around 56% on the previous regular occupancy cap, raises serious questions about the safety and suitability of the site and the capacity of its services to meet residents' needs.

By choosing to open accommodation away from existing support and services in communities, and in isolated locations, the Home Office leaves people unable to access even the most basic activities, services and items, such as clothing and phones etc. The longer men have been held in Napier and Wethersfield, with little to do and growing feelings of desperation, the more tensions have risen and there has been a risk of violence. The Home Office Safeguarding Hub has received referrals regarding men who were refusing to eat, or who had been the victims of assault.

Improvements in Napier were primarily attributed to the reduction in number of occupants, together with a clear restriction in the length of time men are housed there to between 60 and 90 days with an assurance that their asylum claim will be progressed and/or they will be moved on to dispersal accommodation (a house or flat share) during that time. These restrictions were introduced following a legal challenge in the High Court. The maximum intended length of stay in Wethersfield is nine months and in Crowborough it is 90 days, although the Home Office policy allows these limits to be exceeded where suitable onward accommodation cannot be found despite reasonable efforts. This raises questions about how these limits are monitored and enforced, and whether residents are actually moved on within the stated periods. Men should only be moved to new sites for a short and fixed period of time, during which they have access to necessary services and their asylum claims are progressed.

Community tensions

Community tensions have been significant in a number of areas where asylum hotels and large-scale sites have been established, with repeated protests at Wethersfield and Crowborough in recent months. Far-right groups have sought to exploit local concerns, spreading misinformation and inciting hostility towards people seeking asylum. These tensions can have serious consequences not only for local residents and community cohesion, but also for people accommodated at the sites, who may experience demonstrations, hostile rhetoric and threats as frightening and intimidating. Charities and NGOs providing support have also been threatened and attacked.

Large, isolated sites, often established with limited local consultation and inadequate consideration of local infrastructure and services, risk exacerbating these tensions and making meaningful integration and positive relationships with local communities harder to achieve. The Home Affairs Committee has noted that large sites attract greater public attention, complaints and demands on local officials, and criticised the time taken by the Home Office to learn lessons from previous sites.

Recommendations

The Helen Bamber Foundation urges the government to house people seeking protection in communities, not camps. While large sites remain open and new ones are being explored, the government should:

- Urgently address the lack of access to legal advice and support at Crowborough and Wethersfield, and ensure that legal advice is available in any new sites.
- Establish a specific legal advice scheme for people in these sites, and give immigration firms permission to take on cases from asylum accommodation sites regardless of whether their existing legal aid contract is geographically restricted in order to support access to legal advice at these sites.
- Review current Home Office screening processes to ensure that survivors of torture and trafficking are identified, supported appropriately, and not housed in large sites.
- Ensure the immediate provision of phones, SIM cards, and reliable internet to all people seeking asylum in Crowborough and Wethersfield, and in any new sites, to ensure that residents can access legal advice and support.
- Place a time limit on accommodation in all large sites of a maximum of 90 days.

Conclusion

The continued use and planned expansion of large-scale, isolated ex-military sites for asylum accommodation presents significant and well-evidenced risks to residents' safety, wellbeing, and access to justice. There remain a number of systemic lessons from Napier, Wethersfield, Bibby Stockholm and Crowborough that have not been embedded in policymaking or operational practice. Without clear safeguards, robust vulnerability assessments, meaningful access to healthcare and legal advice, and proactive community engagement, these sites are likely to replicate the harms that have already been extensively documented. Urgent clarity is needed on how it will mitigate risks, ensure compliance with statutory obligations, and uphold the rights of those seeking protection.

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