

At what cost?

The ongoing harm caused to men
seeking asylum held in Wethersfield

June 2024



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This report was written by
Kamena Dorling and Maddie
Harris

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Isolation, forced room-sharing and lack of privacy, limited healthcare, the feeling of being in an 'open prison' and not knowing when you might get to leave or what the future holds... all of these problems are experienced by the men living in the 'asylum camp' being run in RAF Wethersfield in Essex. Together they are causing profound harm to the people seeking protection who have arrived in the UK and been moved there against their will.

Six months ago, Humans for Rights Network (HFRN) and the Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) provided detailed evidence of this harm, showing that men were suffering from anxiety and depression, suicidal ideation, intense desperation and fear. Many were extremely vulnerable and the Home Office 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 follow up report shows that very little has changed in Wethersfield. Now, increasing numbers of men are reporting suicidal ideation, incidents of self-harm, and suicide attempts – according to Home Office data, in the first three months of 2024 there were 30 recorded occurrences of men self-harming, attempting suicide, or at serious risk of doing so (no suicide attempts were recorded for 2023). In that period, there were a further 91 recorded occurrences of men in Wethersfield expressing that they were considering suicide or self-harm, and over 160 safeguarding referrals made regarding suicide and self-harm.

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. Many men are becoming too scared to leave their rooms. In February 2024 alone, 12 referrals were made to the Home Office safeguarding team regarding people in Wethersfield who were not eating. In February and March, 18 referrals were made about men who had been the victims of assault.

With a new 'asylum backlog' forming of people who arrived in the UK since March 2023, because of the unworkable Illegal Migration Act 2023, there is ongoing uncertainty about what is happening with the men in Wethersfield's asylum claims, contributing to their anxiety. No legal advice surgeries are being provided at the site, and no-one has received a substantive asylum interview nor a decision on their asylum claim whilst being held there. This is despite many living at the site for six months or more.

Not only has the Home Office continued to move more people into Wethersfield, but it has also not appropriately responded to the increasing number of men living there who are suffering acute psychological distress. Instead, it has 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. The numbers being moved out of the camp on the grounds of suitability have nearly halved.

The Home Office's consistent refusal to transfer people to different accommodation is causing a mass deterioration in the mental and physical health of hundreds of men, many of whom have already experienced great trauma. The Home Office is taking a real and unnecessary risk in continuing to accommodate men in Wethersfield in this way, given the clear and ongoing level of suicidal ideation expressed by these and many other men currently held there.

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. Wethersfield and other 'large site' accommodation centres on ex-military sites/barges should be closed immediately, and all plans to open further similar accommodation abandoned.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2023, Humans for Rights Network (HFRN) and the Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) provided detailed evidence of the profound harm being caused to men housed in the asylum camp at RAF Wethersfield. The report, 'Ghettoised and Traumatized',¹ showed that the mental health of men seeking asylum had worsened following transfer to the site, with symptoms including low mood, loneliness, flashbacks, reduced appetite, weight loss, feelings of despair and difficulty sleeping. Men held there had reported anxiety and depression, suicidal ideation, intense desperation and fear and self-harm. Many were survivors of torture and trafficking and/or had severe mental health issues, despite Home Office guidance in place at the time making clear that people in these groups should not be placed in large sites.

The report highlighted that the very features of Wethersfield, and similar sites such as Napier Barracks, cause significant mental distress. These include:

- **Isolation:** Wethersfield's remote location and restricted access exacerbates feelings of detachment from society, while the lack of adequate facilities heighten tensions in the site as more men are placed there.
- **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:** Overcrowded living conditions significantly impact residents' mental health, and increase the risk of communicable diseases spreading.
- **Inadequate healthcare:** Healthcare services are insufficient, with concerns about the lack of trauma-focused support and barriers to accessing care.

Rather than act on the concerns raised, the government dismissed the report's evidence entirely on the basis that it had "not been written following an 'inspection' or visit of the site to gain first-hand experience/evidence/knowledge".² This was despite the evidence including 10 detailed medical assessments and the testimony of over 100 men, and the Home Office having already forbidden several charities, including Care 4 Calais and HFRN, from entering the isolated site.³ Since then, HBF has requested access to Wethersfield to look at the conditions of the site and their implications on the mental (and physical) health of survivors of torture and trafficking, but the Home Office has not responded to this request.

Furthermore, charities have not been the only ones to raise concerns. When the former Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, David Neal, visited Wethersfield in February 2024, his key fear was the impact of the lack of any purposeful activity in the camp on men's mental health and the increased likelihood of violence. What's worse, he noted that zero changes had been made since his visit to the site in December 2023.⁴

Since 'Ghettoised and Traumatized' was published, HFRN has spoken to over 200 additional men seeking asylum and accommodated in Wethersfield who have revealed that the conditions at the site continue to deteriorate. HBF has carried out a further 10 detailed medical assessments ('suitability assessments'). Increasing numbers of men are reporting suicidal ideation, incidents of self-harm, and suicide attempts, and Home Office data shows a significant rise of this in 2024.

1 Helen Bamber Foundation and Humans for Rights Network, [Ghettoised and Traumatized: the experiences of men held in quasi-detention in Wethersfield](#), December 2023

2 Lord Sharpe of Epsom [in response to parliamentary question from Baroness Lister](#), 13 March 2024

3 The Guardian, [Home Office barred charity over claims it encouraged asylum seeker 'complaints'](#), 10 November 2023

4 [Letter from David Neal, Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration](#), to Tom Pursglove MP, Immigration Minister, 9 February 2024

Not only has the Home Office continued to move more people into Wethersfield, but it has also not appropriately responded to the increasing number of men who are suffering acute psychological distress. Instead, it has amended its 'Allocation of Asylum Accommodation' policy⁵ to make it much *harder* to move vulnerable people out of Wethersfield, despite the harm being caused to their health.

With growing numbers of people seeking asylum in a 'perma-backlog',⁶ as a result of the unworkable Illegal Migration Act 2023, it is still unclear what is happening with the men in Wethersfield's asylum claims, contributing to an ongoing sense of uncertainty and anxiety. No legal advice surgeries are being provided in Wethersfield, and no-one has received a substantive asylum interview nor a decision on their asylum claim whilst being held there. This is despite many living at the site for six months or more.

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. Wethersfield and other 'large site' accommodation centres on ex-military sites/barges should be closed immediately, and all plans to open further similar accommodation abandoned.

5 Home Office, Allocation of asylum accommodation policy, version 12.0, 27 March 2024

6 The Guardian, [Sunak's asylum laws trapping 55,000 people in 'perma-backlog'](#), says UK thinktank, 28 February 2024

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.⁷ **The use of Wethersfield between 2023-24 to 2026-27 is due to cost £338.7 million.**⁸ The National Audit Office has highlighted that the plans to accommodate people in large sites will cost £1.2 billion and more than using hotels.⁹ However, this assumes that the choice is between asylum camps and hotels, when in fact neither should be being used.

Prior to 2019, people seeking asylum in the UK would usually spend three to four weeks – sometimes a few months – in hostel style full-board accommodation (‘initial accommodation’), before being moved to housing across the country, usually on a no-choice basis to areas where properties were cheapest (‘dispersal accommodation’). However, in response to the increased numbers with undecided claims needing accommodation, the Home Office then started to use what was called ‘contingency’ accommodation – hotels and ex-military barracks – for asylum housing.¹⁰

The exorbitant costs seen over the last few years have resulted from the Home Office’s failure to stay on top of decision making in asylum cases. **In early 2020 there were around 2,800 people in initial accommodation** at any one time, of which around 1,000 were in hotels. The average time people spent in initial accommodation before being rehoused in longer-term dispersal accommodation was 26 days.¹¹ **In March 2024, over 30,000 people (over 38% of all people seeking asylum) were living in initial/contingency accommodation (including hotels and large sites) – most have been there for months and even years.**¹²

The rising numbers are due to an increasing backlog and the percentage of asylum applications that are taking more than six months to process (meaning that people are unable to move out of asylum accommodation and ‘free up’ space). **In 2014, over 80% of asylum cases were processed within 6 months. Ten years later, that number had plummeted to less than 15% and at the end of March 2024 there were over 56,000 cases that had been waiting for over 6 months for an initial decision (21,000 waiting over a year).**¹³ A significant reduction in the numbers waiting for decisions and reliant on asylum support would ease pressure on the asylum accommodation estate and remove the need for hotels and large sites. The use of Wethersfield was a political choice made by a government determined not to address the actual problems in the system.

Furthermore, the expected occupancy of the site has been significantly reduced. At the end of January there were 555 men in Wethersfield¹⁴ and the Home Office has decided to cap the regular occupancy at 800 in light of “local concerns, mitigating impacts, and managing the sites safely.”¹⁵ Under the Special Development Order used to extend the use of Wethersfield, **no more than 580 asylum seekers may be accommodated on the land until the Home Secretary has submitted for approval an operational management plan.**¹⁶ This is just a third of the original planned occupancy of 1,700. **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 can house fewer than 600 people could ever be seen as value for money.**

7 The Town and Country Planning (Former RAF Airfield Wethersfield) (Accommodation for Asylum-Seekers etc.) Special Development Order 2024 (SI 2024/411). See Helen Bamber Foundation, [Evidence to the Secondary Legislation Committee on RAF Wethersfield](#), April 2024, for more information.

8 [Submissions on the Town and Country Planning \(Former RAF Airfield Wethersfield\) \(Accommodation for Asylum-Seekers etc.\) Special Development Order 2024 \(SI 2024/411\)](#), and government response

9 National Audit Office, [Alternative asylum accommodation will cost more than hotels](#), 20 March 2024

10 House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, [Asylum accommodation: the use of hotels and military barracks](#), November 2020

11 National Audit Office, Asylum accommodation and support, July 2020

12 Home Office, Immigration Statistics Year Ending December 2023

13 Home Office, Immigration and Protection Data Q1 2024

14 [Letter from David Neal, Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration](#), to Tom Pursglove MP, Immigration Minister, 9 February 2024

15 [Submissions on the Special Development Order](#) (n8).

16 *ibid*

THE EVIDENCE IN THIS REPORT

The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) is a charity working with survivors of torture, trafficking and other extreme human cruelty. Its work includes conducting medical assessments of survivors, written by qualified clinical experts and commissioned by legal representatives, to corroborate a survivor's testimony of ill-treatment. Each of HBF's report writers has been trained in the forensic documentation of the physical and/or psychological and emotional sequelae of torture, ill-treatment and other serious forms of physical, psychological, or sexual violence in accordance with the Istanbul Protocol.¹⁷ **Since Wethersfield opened, HBF has carried out 20 assessments of Wethersfield residents to determine whether or not they fall under the Home Office's criteria that would deem them unsuitable to be placed in Wethersfield. HBF continues to conduct these assessments. Those assessed have included survivors of torture and trafficking and people seeking asylum from countries where high numbers are granted refugee status, such as Afghanistan, Sudan and Eritrea.**¹⁸

Humans for Rights Network (HFRN) is a need-led human rights organisation, established to facilitate safety and dignity for people forced to migrate; to advocate for a rights-based approach to the movement of people throughout Northern Europe; and to represent humans whose rights are violated. It is led and informed by the migrants it works with and collaborates to address mistreatment and challenge systemic and structural racism and discrimination and their harmful impact. **HFRN's work in Wethersfield focuses on complex casework to assist people out of the camp into more suitable accommodation and evidence gathering to expose the systemic harm and abuse men held there are subjected to. To date HFRN has conducted complex casework with over 250 men in Wethersfield and is in contact with a further 130 men in Wethersfield.**

HFRN holds information in relation to primary vulnerability for 298 of the men it has supported or is supporting. This information shows that at least 268 individuals are unsuitable for accommodation in Wethersfield due to:

- Indicators of trafficking or exploitation
- Torture or extreme physical or psychological violence
- Mental health
- Physical health
- Being under 18 but 'age disputed'.

At least 100 of the men are survivors of torture.

There is frequently a combined unsuitability - i.e. someone may be a survivor of torture but also be experiencing acute mental health problems. HFRN records a person as a survivor of torture as a priority and therefore expects that there are many others who are also survivors of trafficking. HFRN is also concerned that the lack of information regarding exploitation and trafficking provided to these men may result in them not connecting their experiences to the legal definition that may be applied to them.

The quotes shared in this report have come from men held in Wethersfield supported by HFRN.

The names in the case studies have been changed.

17 [Istanbul Protocol: Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (2022 edition)

18 Of the nationalities that commonly claim asylum in the UK, Afghans, Eritreans, and Sudanese typically have very high grant rates at initial decision (98%, 99% and 83% respectively). See Home Office, [How many people do we grant protection to?](#)

RISING RISK OF SUICIDE AND SELF-HARM

All men assessed by HBF clinicians displayed symptoms of worsening mental health following transfer to Wethersfield, which in all cases were attributed, at least in part, to the conditions in the site. Symptoms included low mood, anxiety, loneliness, flashbacks, reduced appetite, weight loss, feelings of despair and acute difficulties sleeping. Men experienced a worsening in their Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms since being placed there and all presented with clinical symptoms of depression. In every case, HBF clinicians undertaking the assessments were of the medical opinion that the person's mental health was likely to continue to deteriorate further whilst they continued to be held in Wethersfield.

HFRN has spoken to over 300 men either in person or during phone appointments. Almost every individual spoken to has expressed some form of mental distress. Overwhelmingly, men in Wethersfield express that either the conditions themselves are causing a deterioration in their mental health or that the isolation and treatment they experience in Wethersfield are re-traumatising for them as they have endured some form of arbitrary detention or acute mistreatment in their country of origin or during their journey to the UK.

"When I arrived in the UK, I expected to have freedom and safety. But this is not the case. I feel like I am in a prison. I have not committed a crime but I'm in this prison. My mental health is getting worse and I have self harm thoughts. I can't sleep. I stay awake all night. I have nightmares about ending my life. I lost weight and my body is getting weaker every day. I don't have any appetite. I share the room with five other people. I don't have privacy."

A client of HFRN, who has been in Wethersfield for over six months and is a survivor of torture.

From the assessments conducted by HBF since 'Ghettoised and Traumatized' was published in December 2023, there has been a marked rise in suicidal ideation, in part linked to the length of time people have been held in Wethersfield. One assessment describes the individual as having increasing and distressing thoughts of harming himself - feeling as if he has 'gone crazy' and punching himself in the head daily. In that case, a safeguarding referral had to be made due to the increase in risk of self-harm and suicide. Another individual witnessed two other men held in Wethersfield threatening to jump off a balcony to end their lives - this led to him thinking of doing the same.

This clear deterioration in the health of me at the site is also demonstrated in Home Office data. In the first three months of 2024 there were:

- **30 recorded occurrences of men self-harming or attempting suicide or at serious risk of doing so** ¹⁹ (no suicide attempts were recorded for 2023)²⁰;
- 91 recorded occurrences of men expressing that they were considering suicide or self-harm;
- **Over 160 safeguarding referrals made regarding suicide and self harm.**

HFRN alone has responded to, or been made aware of, 14 incidents of attempted suicide between January and May 2024, and four incidents of self-harm. It is the understanding of HFRN that in all but two cases, these men were taken to hospital but were subsequently returned to the camp by the Home Office, with no follow up mental health support provided. Safeguarding alerts made by HFRN on behalf of these men to the Home Office and its contractor Clearsprings Ready Homes, responsible for the running of the site, have gone unanswered.

19 30 recorded occurrences "where there is a serious, immediate, and evidence-based risk the person is likely to commit suicide or harm themselves, or there has been a serious attempt at suicide which resulted in medical treatment or was likely to result in medical treatment". One individual may have been involved in more than one occurrence. Freedom of Information request sent by the Helen Bamber Foundation, Ref: FOI2024/03797, answered by the Home Office on 5th June 2024

20 Freedom of Information request sent by the Helen Bamber Foundation, Ref: FOI2024/01635, answered by the Home Office on 14th March 2024

While between July 2023 and January 2024, 43 referrals in total were made to the Home Office 'Safeguarding Hub' (the team responsible for the safeguarding of people in the asylum system), this jumped to 175 in February 2024 alone, and 129 in March. **63% of all referrals were regarding mental health or suicide and self-harm.**

"The camp is affecting my mental health as well, it's very restricted and feels like being in prison. I can't sleep at night, traumatised by thinking of my journey and its hardship. I was detained ... I was given little food in detention. Sometimes I think of harming myself or ending my life, when I think of ending up in this prison after all the hardship I endured."

A survivor of torture who has been in Wethersfield for over six months.

Many men in Wethersfield have mental health needs that simply cannot be met while they are there — not just because the environment itself causes harm but because it is not conducive to trauma-informed therapeutic care. Trauma-focused therapy can be temporarily de-stabilising: symptoms may get worse before they get better and therefore the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines make clear that therapy for PTSD should be offered when the person is in a position of relative stability and perceived safety.²¹ Whilst it is possible to undergo therapy in situations of ongoing threat,²² this is only advisable when there is no current possibility of escape from such situations. It is ethically unconscionable to deliberately put traumatised individuals in situations that at best either maintain their traumatised state or cause it to deteriorate. Yet this is what is happening in Wethersfield, which (like immigration detention)²³ is not a suitable location for people to undergo rehabilitative treatment.

In December, HBF and HFRN highlighted that "continued instability, uncertainty and placement in unsuitable conditions can have an ongoing negative impact on mental health and on prospects of recovery" and "leads to the sense of indefinite internment",²⁴ but nothing has been done to provide a clear sense to men there about plans for being moved out, or what is happening with their asylum claims. Many men shared that the uncertainty around how long they will have to stay at Wethersfield contributes to their depression and distress. Many men have reported to HFRN that they were told by camp staff that they would transfer at around the six month mark. Since then, others have been told they will remain in Wethersfield for eight months, others nothing at all. It is HFRN's view that not only is this uncertainty and ambiguity regarding how long men will be held in Wethersfield incredibly harmful, it is also being used as a way to pacify, coerce and control these men by the Home Office and its contractors.

The Home Office's continued failure to respond to safeguarding issues raised by men held in Wethersfield, and by organisations providing casework and medical care, and its consistent refusal to transfer men to more suitable accommodation is causing a mass deterioration in the mental and physical health of hundreds of men, many of whom have already experienced great trauma. The Home Office is taking a real and unnecessary risk in continuing to accommodate men in Wethersfield in this way, given the clear and ongoing level of suicidal ideation expressed by these and many other men currently held there.

21 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), [Guidelines on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#), 2018

22 Yim, S. H., Lorenz, H., & Salkovskis, P. (2023). The Effectiveness and Feasibility of Psychological Interventions for Populations Under Ongoing Threat: A Systematic Review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 15248380231156198

23 Helen Bamber Foundation, Medical Justice, ATLEU, BID and FLEX, [Abuse by the System: Survivors of trafficking in immigration detention](#), October 2022

24 Helen Bamber Foundation and Humans for Rights Network, *Ghettoised and Traumatized: the experiences of men held in quasi-detention in Wethersfield*, December 2023

"I can't eat the food here as it is causing me digestive issues. I am suffering back pain which resulted from the torture I experienced. I also feel pain on my left hand and left side. I can only sleep on my right side.

I am suffering mentally, everything in Wethersfield reminds me of the trauma that I have lived. I don't have any contact with my family. I couldn't contact them as I don't have any money to buy a calling card and contact them.

I'm isolated and never left the camp since I arrived. I don't have the energy to do anything.

If this continues, I don't know what my reaction would be."

ISOLATION, BOREDOM AND DISCONTENT

Wethersfield is in an extremely isolated location. The government has claimed that it has been designed to be "as self-sufficient as possible" in order to minimise the impact on local communities, and services. This includes providing accommodation with an on-site primary health service, catering, communal space, plus faith and worship facilities.²⁵ However, the former Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, David Neal, wrote to the Home Secretary and Immigration Minister in December 2023 and February 2024 raising serious concerns about the lack of purposeful activity on site and the deleterious effect this has on residents' mental health, leading to a heightened risk of disorder. He refers to witnessing "an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness caused by boredom which invariably, in my opinion, leads to violence." He warned that, if numbers were increased from 555 to 800 men on site as was at that time planned, this would "increase the risk of a serious incident impacting on the safety and wellbeing of Home Office Staff, contractors and service users onsite".²⁶

The isolated nature of the site means that transport is essential in order to get to nearby towns to access services – there is a narrow road leading from the nearest village (over a mile away) to the base but this has no pavements and is not safe to walk on.²⁷ A bus service is provided by the site operator and runs from Wethersfield to nearby towns each day (Braintree 9 miles, Chelmsford 21 miles, Colchester 25 miles). However, the bus services provided are regularly oversubscribed with residents reporting difficulties registering to leave the site via the service.

One man described how he would like to leave the site more but is deterred by the long waits for the bus and he feels the bus drivers treat residents in a 'dehumanising' way and treats them as if they were 'criminals'. Another explained that he feels 'controlled' as his movements on and off site are recorded. He can only leave at specific times and the smell of the bus makes him feel nauseous.

"I have been at the camp for over a month now, and I find myself going through a constant struggle. The cold weather here has caused me to develop a cough, making it extremely difficult for me to survive in these conditions. The church is located far from the camp, and I am unable to attend regularly. Attending church has always provided me with a sense of solace and peace, and not being able to do so has greatly contributed to my stress levels. Moreover, the camp is often plagued by conflicts and fights between individuals, which further adds to my anxiety and fear. I want help."

25 Home Office, [Wethersfield: factsheet](#), Updated 24 November 2023

26 [Letter from David Neal, Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration](#), to Tom Pursglove MP, Immigration Minister, 9 February 2024

27 The Guardian, ['Like a stalag': local people condemn asylum seeker housing on Essex airbase](#), 23 July 2023

Residents report having very little to do. There is a gym but it is ill-equipped and in high demand. There is no library. Local volunteers provide twice weekly conversational English sessions on the site and hope to introduce music and gardening sessions. However, these initiatives are limited by the restricted pool of volunteers available and the lack of support and funding from the responsible statutory agencies. Frequently some of the men who wish to attend these sessions are turned away due to lack of capacity.²⁸ There is limited access to unreliable Wi-Fi which makes communication with friends and family extremely difficult, as well as heavily restricting access to legal advice.

"The food is terrible, no one is helpful and responsible for nothing, the facilities are dirty. There is nothing to entertain you... it's crushing my mental health, my life is supposed to be protected."

Invariably, with high numbers of residents given little to do and limited opportunities to leave the site, there are high feelings of stress and tension among residents. Many residents reported being exposed to daily fights, residents in 'gangs' and people being injured. Fights often break out because residents are frustrated and because there are long queues for food and for the few activities that are available.

Incidents of fighting have increased significantly in recent months, as numbers have increased and overcrowding becomes more of a problem, coupled with the fact that many of the men have by this point been held in Wethersfield for a long time, with no clarity on when they will leave. The police have to attend Wethersfield to break up fights, while the guards are reported to be aggressive and abusive, something that some residents have reported makes them feel anxious and reminds them of ill-treatment by the authorities in their own country. Because they feel intimidated, many residents stay in their rooms as much as possible. A growing number of men are so terrified to leave their rooms that they are not accessing food.

"I was trafficked to Libya. They kept us in a hangar-like prison in a remote place that I don't know where it was. I stayed there for over a month. They were threatening to kill us or sell us. If we ask anything they would beat us. There was no food for days sometimes and at times they would give us a few biscuits. It was a nightmare."

This place is re-traumatising me. It reminds me of the prison in Libya. My freedom is limited and I am treated like a subhuman. I can't sleep in this place. The alarm goes off all the time.

I feel that I don't have rights and my freedom is limited. I am isolated in this place. I feel depressed and my mental health isn't in the right place. I expected to get basic human rights in the UK and unfortunately I have none. I'm not treated as a human being."

28 [Submissions on the Town and Country Planning \(Former RAF Airfield Wethersfield\)\(Accommodation for Asylum-Seekers etc.\) Special Development Order 2024 \(SI 2024/411\) and the Town and Country Planning \(Former RAF Scampton\)\(Accommodation for Asylum-Seekers etc.\) Special Development Order 2024 \(SI 2024/412\), and government response](#)

CASE STUDY - ADIO



Adio's freedom of movement on the site itself is restricted due to the violence that frequently breaks out between the men. He described how small disagreements between men could erupt into verbal arguments and brawls, particularly between groups of different ethnicities. He explained that at Wethersfield he belongs to a minority of 'black African' men and that he and his friends find themselves frequently targeted by others. When he was playing football with other men, one of them randomly started punching him. More men joined in (from both 'black African' and 'Arab' backgrounds) and started fighting each other. Eventually, the entire pitch erupted into racialised violence. Wethersfield security staff were present but could not do much to intervene as they were completely outnumbered.

Adio now avoids going outside to exercise for fear of being attacked. He also explained that some people have now stopped going to the canteen for food out of fear of being attacked. He is now only eating two meals a day instead of three meals in order to avoid the canteen because there are always fights.

One man who experienced violence whilst in the camp, and was subsequently too afraid to leave his room told HFRN:

"We've been inside the room now for 10 days. They (camp staff) stopped feeding us six days ago now we don't have any food for four days. We have no energy. We are very tired. We are too frightened to eat in the lunch area."

In February 2024 alone, 12 referrals were made to the Home Office Safeguarding Hub regarding people in Wethersfield who were not eating. In February and March, 18 referrals were made about men who had been the victims of assault.²⁹

HFRN has documented a number of incidents where men have been subjected to violence or conflict in Wethersfield many due to ethnicity, nationality or faith. Despite 'Pre-action Protocol' letters³⁰ being sent to the Home Office in some of these cases, the men have not been moved. No clear information is provided to the men regarding how they may report these types of incidents.

"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. I am seeking asylum to protect my dignity as a human being but I feel unaccepted and unwelcomed. 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."

²⁹ Freedom of Information request response ref: FOI2024/03797, 5th June 2024

³⁰ This is a legal letter sent to the Home Office in order to try and resolve a dispute before court proceedings are commenced. In these cases, the letter lays out the reasons why the particular individual is unsuitable for being accommodated in Wethersfield, along with wider grounds for challenging the site in its entirety, with the remedy being the transfer of the individual to more suitable accommodation within a fixed timeframe.

INADEQUATE HEALTHCARE

"I came here by Libya. In Libya I faced a lot of struggles as you know any person who uses this road has his own struggles. I was in prison, they tortured me, they beat me every night and day. Now I'm also a TB patient. I can't sleep well. I sleep one hour a day because of this stress. I want this transfer so badly. I can't even get medical assistance, I asked them every single day but they didn't give me any tablet or solution to my problem."

A torture survivor who has been in Wethersfield for over five months

It is critical that those responsible for the health needs of a high volume of people seeking asylum or who have experienced trafficking and modern slavery have adequate training as there are particular barriers to those groups having their healthcare needs identified and met.³¹ These include practical barriers (language, illiteracy, no knowledge of systems) and trauma-related barriers (lack of trust and difficulty building relationships). As far as HBF and HFRN have been able to gather, expertise in addressing and surmounting these barriers is lacking from the provision in Wethersfield at present.

Wethersfield has "on-site primary healthcare delivered by a local healthcare provider Monday to Friday."³² Commisceo Primary Care Solutions has been paid £1.1 million over 18 months to provide health assessments for people arriving at Wethersfield and has a dedicated medical centre on-site, run by healthcare professionals, a doctor and nurses, who are able to prescribe medication.³³ Screening on arrival at the Wethersfield site should include a general physical and mental health screen, "in line with any standard GP Health Check" and screens for HIV, TB, Syphilis plus Hepatitis A and C.³⁴

One of the planning conditions attached to the Special Development Order for the continued use of Wethersfield as an asylum camp is the provision of a low-level trauma-informed mental health support service and confidential health advice on site. However, Doctors of the World, in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières have been providing a primary healthcare mobile clinic outside the main gates of Wethersfield due to concerns about unresolved/unmet health needs. Their May 2024 report highlights the significant mental health impact of living in Wethersfield and underscores that "there is no onsite or easily accessible, tailored therapeutic mental health services nor access to trauma-informed therapy services" at the site.³⁵

Many of the residents assessed by HBF in the last six months reported physical and mental health concerns that were not adequately addressed. There have been a number of cases where men have faced sleeping difficulties connected to mental health and the only response has been to prescribe sleeping tablets, rather than any mental health support.

One man reported struggling to be seen by the onsite GP. He had to wait in the main office for up to an hour to speak to a member of staff to request a GP appointment, at which point he had to explain his symptoms within earshot of other residents and staff members before the request would be made to him to see a doctor. He suffered from widespread itchy rash but was given the same cream on repeat even though it did not work. He did not approach the onsite GP about his mental health because he did not have faith in their ability to take care of his health and because it would mean explaining his symptoms to non-clinical staff in front of others.

31 Talks, I., Mobarak, B. A., Katona, C., Hunt, J., Winters, N., & Geniets, A. (2024). [A mile in their shoes: understanding healthcare journeys of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK](#); Waterman, L. Z., Katona, C., & Katona, C. (2020). [Assessing asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants](#). BJPsych Bulletin, 44(2), 75-80

32 Home Office, [Wethersfield: factsheet](#), Updated 24 May 2024

33 The Independent, [Private firm to be awarded £1m health contract at new asylum accommodation site](#), 23 June 2023

34 NHS Mid and South Essex, Freedom of Information Act response: Healthcare provision to asylum seekers in Wethersfield, Ref: 2324172, 21st August 2023; [Wethersfield: Community update newsletter](#), updated 24 May 2024

35 Doctors of the World and Médecins Sans Frontières, ["Like a prison: no control, no sleep" Mental Health Crisis at Wethersfield Containment Site](#), May 2024

One man, a torture survivor who has been in Wethersfield for over five months told HFRN;

"These days I am having stress due to the conditions here and related to my family back home. I am prediabetic. I figured out recently when I met my GP doctor. I am not getting enough food. Starving in the middle of the night. Going outside for toilet many times due to the diabetes during night and the weather is very cold. The food being served is not enough for me as I have to avoid fried foods and almost half of the meals not good for my health. The stress in the camp is hurting me mentally. I need to be somewhere where I can concentrate on myself, where I get spiritual help, where I can pray with people who speak my language."

One man was quarantined due to scabies but reported that it simply got worse and he was not given medical treatment while quarantined. He asked for further treatment and reported suicidal ideation but instead was given more cream and placed in quarantine for a further 24 hours. In the end he called an ambulance. He was not taken to hospital but instead was given a warning letter from Clearsprings for his behaviour of making 'false calls' to emergency services. The following week he had another appointment due to the rash and the impact on his mental health. He was told he would feel better if he left Wethersfield and to speak to his legal representative. He was due to have a National Referral Mechanism interview (having been referred to the NRM as a potential victim of trafficking) the same day but was taken to quarantine again and forced to miss his interview.

Following 'Ghettoised and Traumatized', HBF has been made aware from viewing medical records and discussions with other professionals working with men in Wethersfield that, in accordance with internal policy, the medical staff are not allowed to provide letters of recommendation regarding a person's transfer out of Wethersfield, regardless of any physical or mental health concerns that are raised with them. In addition to this, HBF has seen instances where, rather than escalating concerns about a person's suitability to be accommodated at Wethersfield with the appropriate teams, as would be expected, the individual is simply told to raise it themselves with the welfare team. A 'self-reported' concern is likely to be given less weight than if that concern had been raised by a medical professional, especially now that the Home Office has changed its guidance (see page 17), therefore reducing the likelihood of being transferred.

It is clear from HBF's assessments that where the healthcare staff have been provided with information that should lead to a further assessment of a person's suitability for being in Wethersfield being undertaken this has not been done. Information acquired via a Freedom of Information Act request³⁶ makes clear that health professionals working onsite in Wethersfield have been provided with no information or training on applying the suitability criteria for accommodating individuals at Wethersfield. The reason given for this is that it is "the role of the Home Office". However, as noted above, it does not appear that in many cases the relevant information is being passed to the Home Office.

"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. We complained to Migrant Help and things seem to be improving. 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."

Torture survivor who has been in Wethersfield for over four months

36 Freedom of Information Request reference 4487711

CASE STUDY - SAMIR



In April 2024 HFRN began assisting Samir, a man who was seen by an independent doctor (unconnected to the private contractor providing medical care to residents of Wethersfield) who determined that his injuries, sustained as a result of torture and modern slavery endured in Libya, and associated acute pain and mental health issues amounted to a disability. Upon arrival, Samir was not offered or provided with adequate care or support. His condition was exacerbated by being held in Wethersfield. However, despite regularly reporting to medical staff that his condition was deteriorating and the medication provided was aggravating his condition, he was told they could not do anything further for him. Medical staff told him not to come back and see them as all they were able to provide was this medication. He sought help to relocate from Wethersfield, but healthcare staff told him that they could not help him with either providing a supporting letter or contacting the Home Office on his behalf. As his condition deteriorated both physically and mentally, he continued to only be able to access a healthcare appointment via the welfare team which involves queuing outside for significant periods of time. It has at times taken Samir over a week to access a medical appointment. Samir was sent around in circles by the various teams on site, each of whom told him to speak to another regarding a transfer, with the welfare, health care teams and Home Office all respectively telling him to speak to another of the three teams at Wethersfield. Samir also contacted Migrant Help who again told him to speak to the health or welfare teams.

Recently, Samir felt left with no other option than to leave Wethersfield and travel to a town to seek medical care, where he subsequently spent a number of nights sleeping on the streets.

LIVING IN LIMBO

The government has set out that for Wethersfield the “maximum length of stay at the site is currently set to between six and nine months, except where the Secretary of State is unable to find suitable onward dispersed accommodation despite reasonable efforts to do so”.³⁷ However, to date there is no clear and transparent move-on system from Wethersfield, and no information provided as to what is happening with residents’ asylum claims (the assumption being that if granted status they would be moved on from that accommodation). For all of those HBF and HFRN have worked with in Wethersfield it has been unclear when their claims would be processed due to the uncertainties surrounding the implementation of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Rwanda removals scheme.³⁸

In contrast with formal detention, where detainees should have access to legal advice via the Detained Duty Advice Scheme (notwithstanding its current limitations),³⁹ it is our understanding that there has been no legal advice surgery made available in Wethersfield, and to date no resident has had their substantive asylum interview. This ongoing uncertainty leads to the sense of indefinite internment, further fostering the ‘detention-like’ atmosphere.

Whilst those involved with the asylum centre at Napier Barracks have reported an ‘improvement’ in conditions there since it was first opened, this has primarily been 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.⁴⁰

37 Home Office, [Wethersfield: factsheet](#), Updated 24 November 2023

38 *R (on the application of AAA (Syria) and others) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2023] UKSC 42

39 Bail for Immigration Detainees, [Brook House report finds systemic flaws in Home Office decision-making & Rwanda policy](#)

40 *R (NB & Ors) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2021] EWHC 1489 (Admin).

CASE STUDY - OMAR



Omar is in his early 20s and from an East African country. He arrived in the UK in Autumn 2023 on a small boat and has been accommodated at Wethersfield since. He sought the assistance of Doctors of the World and Médecins Sans Frontières who are carrying out health assessments of men accommodated at the site.

Omar struggles with poor sleep. His mental health has deteriorated since being accommodated at Wethersfield. He describes the crippling boredom at the site and the fact that he feels that he is inhibited in his freedom of movement due to the site's rural location. There are free shuttle buses to Colchester and Braintree which he makes use of from time to time. However, he has no money to spend as he receives less than £9 per week from the Home Office. There is a refugee drop-in centre that he has attended in Colchester.

He struggled to find a solicitor. The list of solicitors that has been circulated at Wethersfield, provided by Migrant Help, is out of date, with key law firms missing. Omar contacted every provider on the list but was either told that they were not taking new clients or that they were unwilling to take on a Wethersfield client. He does not know many people at Wethersfield who have solicitors. Nobody seems to have been provided with immigration advice.

There is currently no functioning Wi-Fi at Wethersfield. Sometimes it will turn on, but the connection is so weak that it barely works. Omar relies on a SIM card that was given to him by the charity in Colchester. The charity pays for 25 GB of data per month. Once that runs out, he will use some of his limited Home Office funds to top it up. When asked whether he would be able to do a Zoom call to provide his lawyer instructions on his case, he responded that he does not think the Wi-Fi will support a Zoom call. He will not be able to afford to top up the data on his phone to accommodate a video conference.

There is no computer room provided at Wethersfield that could be used to attend a video conference. There is no printer that Omar can use to print documents that his lawyer might send him by email. His lawyer asked the staff at Wethersfield if he could use their scanner but that request was denied.

Since the passing of the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024, HFRN has seen an increase in requests for information from its clients. HFRN has endeavoured to provide information in relation to the Illegal Migration Act and Safety of Rwanda Act. However, due to the fact that its access to Wethersfield is prohibited, there remains no meaningful access to legal advice and information for the men held there. When sharing information in relation to the Rwanda removals scheme, many clients of HFRN responded saying that they had no other source of information.

Wethersfield is located in a legal aid desert, there are no legal aid providers of asylum and immigration advice in the area.⁴¹ Furthermore there are significant access to justice issues such as no information regarding law firms with capacity provided, no financial support provided for men to travel to legal appointments, no private spaces or access to computer equipment to facilitate access to legal advice and no privacy - men are forced to disclose private matters in an environment that they are likely to be overheard.

41 Dr Jo Wilding, [No access to justice: How legal advice deserts fail refugees, migrants and our communities](#), May 2022

DECIDING 'SUITABILITY'

For years, the Home Office has accepted that certain 'vulnerable' people should not be forced to share rooms (and therefore are not suitable for large scale accommodation with dormitories or many people in one room) and has committed to 'screening-out' those people when deciding what asylum accommodation to house people in. This has included victims of trafficking, those with complex health needs, those with disabilities, and those who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence (who have had an individual evaluation of their situation confirming that they have special needs).⁴² However, weaknesses in the screening process has meant that high numbers have been wrongly placed in Wethersfield. Between the camp opening in July 2023 and the end of January 2024, 231 men were moved out because they did not meet the suitability criteria outlined in the Home Office's 'Allocation of Asylum Accommodation' policy in place at the time.⁴³

Yet, rather than address this problem, in February 2024 the Home Office amended the 'Allocation of Asylum Accommodation' policy to increase the threshold and level of evidence required before a person can be deemed unsuitable for being placed/held in Wethersfield. This appears to have been intended to reduce the number of legal challenges being brought, rather than based on any assessment of the impact it would have on men moved there.

Under the new guidance, those previously deemed to be automatically unsuitable now *may* be unsuitable, but only if (a) they "provide evidence that they have had an individual evaluation of their situation that confirms they have special needs" and (b) those needs cannot be met at the relevant accommodation site. The evidence of "an individual evaluation" should be "verifiable expert or professional evidence". The burden placed on people seeking asylum to show that they are not suitable for large sites is disproportionate; and this high evidential burden will significantly increase the need for help from professionals supporting people seeking asylum.

People seeking asylum already experience practical barriers in obtaining medical evidence, particularly regarding the suitability of accommodation, including language barriers and difficulties in accessing GP services.⁴⁴ In 'Ghettoised and Traumatized' we outlined the difficulties in accessing primary care at the site, and many of these have not been sufficiently addressed. For example, interpreters have not always been provided during medical appointments and individuals are not able to adequately express their medical concerns or receive information as to the diagnosis or treatment.

Furthermore, as explained above, health staff are prohibited from providing evidence to support an individual's claim that they should be moved from the site. Therefore, challenging the decision made by the Home Office to accommodate a person in Wethersfield and state that alternative accommodation should be provided due to a person's unsuitability relies heavily on individuals being able to contact a relevant NGO, such as HFRN, for support. This is challenging both due to the lack of access to the camp and constraints on the capacity of organisations to assist in a timely way. The complete lack of privacy also requires men to make significant disclosures of abuse and harm, mental and physical health conditions in order to access support and for these letters to be prepared.

Since January 2024, the vast majority of Pre-action Protocol letters sent by HFRN with the intention of securing a transfer for the individual from Wethersfield have been unsuccessful. As a result of this, people's conditions have continued to deteriorate. Once this initial challenge has been refused, and a person has received confirmation that the Home Office does not intend to transfer a person from Wethersfield, they require a legal aid solicitor to progress their challenge. HFRN is able to refer people on but at any one time generally has a waiting list of 40-50 men in need of legal representation due to capacity of legal aid firms. Many of these men will never secure legal representation due to this capacity issue and will continue to be harmed by Wethersfield.

42 Home Office, [Allocation of asylum accommodation policy](#), version 10, 10 October 2023

43 Ibid

44 Talks, I., Mobarak, B. A., Katona, C., Hunt, J., Winters, N., & Geniets, A. (2024). [A mile in their shoes: understanding healthcare journeys of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK](#); Waterman, L. Z., Katona, C., & Katona, C. (2020). [Assessing asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants](#). BJPsych Bulletin, 44(2), 75-80

Data from the Home Office for February and March 2024 shows that just 22 and 23 people respectively were moved from Wethersfield on suitability grounds.⁴⁵ Given that 231 people were moved out over a six-month period on suitability grounds prior to February this would suggest that the numbers being moved on that basis have nearly halved.

The only group for whom 'large site' accommodation is still deemed automatically unsuitable are survivors of trafficking - but since October 2023 they have been required to have a positive 'reasonable grounds' (RG) decision from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). This also presents a significant challenge. Despite Home Office guidance stating that RG decisions should be made within five working days of referral where possible, the average (median) waiting time for decisions jumped from six days in 2022 to 42 days between October and December 2023.⁴⁶

Furthermore positive RG decisions plummeted from 88% in 2022 to 55% in 2023, in part due to changes to policy that were subsequently found to be unlawful.⁴⁷ Despite the policy being amended there remain concerns that people are being expected to provide independent evidence to show that they could be a victim of trafficking, something that would be particularly problematic for a person in Wethersfield. There are also a large number of requests to the Home Office for it to reconsider NRM decisions, with a high proportion of decisions overturned. In 2023, 60% (400) of reasonable grounds decisions which were reconsidered received a positive outcome.⁴⁸

It also appears that Wethersfield staff, as well as other Home Office contractors, have not been referring individuals into the NRM despite having a duty to, therefore denying individuals of the potential support they may be entitled to under the NRM, and eliminating the possibility of an individual obtaining the necessary evidence in order to be moved out of the site. All of these factors contribute to a situation where survivors of trafficking are wrongly being moved to, and kept in Wethersfield, regardless of the harm this causes them.

DATA BREACHES

In very early April 2024, HFRN received information from a number of men held in Wethersfield that they were to be transferred out of the site. Whilst this was an enormous relief to the approximately 70 men who were transferred, the method by which those that were to be transferred were informed raised significant concerns and questions regarding the way in which the Home Office and its contractors handle the personal data of these men. Lists of names along with dates of births, port reference numbers and onward hotel addresses were posted on walls in communal areas around the camp, accessible to all residents and staff members.

There appeared to be no reason for who was transferred other than the length of time an individual had been held in Wethersfield, therefore leaving them open to be transferred back at any time. HFRN was in contact with 27 men allocated a transfer and all had been in Wethersfield for between six and eight months. However others who had been in the camp for a similar time, were not moved. The moves also appear to have been in response to the restrictions placed on the site under the conditions of the SDO, which states that there are remedial works required to resolve issues such as radioactive soil, poor sanitation and drainage and unexploded ordnance.

45 FOI Reference: FOI2024/03307, 24th April 2024

46 [Modern Slavery: National NRM and Duty to Notify statistics UK, Quarter 4 2023 – October to December](#)

47 Helen Bamber Foundation, [New test for Reasonable Grounds decisions in Modern Slavery guidance withdrawn](#), July 2023

48 [Modern Slavery: National NRM and Duty to Notify statistics UK, End of year summary 2023](#)



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

People seeking asylum need to be housed in safe, appropriate accommodation in the community that supports their recovery, facilitates their engagement with the asylum process, and allows them to integrate and build networks. Not only does holding people in open-prison camps like Wethersfield not allow for this recovery, it does the exact opposite – causing additional pain and trauma to people who have already experienced conflict, oppression, abuse, torture and trafficking. While the government might condemn the ill-treatment of people in their countries of origin, it is deliberately causing them additional suffering once they reach the UK seeking protection.

Rather than focussing time and resource on the creation of mass asylum camps, the government should prioritise processing asylum claims so that refugees can move on with their lives and support themselves. The government must:

- Immediately close all 'large scale' accommodation centres on ex-military sites/barges and cease any plans to open further similar accommodation. Reliance on other forms of emergency accommodation, such as hotels, should be significantly decreased and a strict time limit on people's stays there should be introduced.
- Ensure that thorough support needs assessments are completed by the Home Office and used to inform asylum accommodation placements, resulting in suitable placements for people with physical and mental health conditions.
- Commit to housing people seeking asylum in communities, by urgently addressing the long-standing structural issues in the management and monitoring of contracted provision, and by significantly investing in improvements to the current stock of dispersal housing.
- Resource decision making to ensure that the backlog of asylum claims is cleared and decisions on new claims made in a timely way, with the most vulnerable prioritised (including children's cases) and decisions made on the papers (without the need for an interview) where possible. To this end, the government should also remove processes that cause further delay in decision making, including provisions on inadmissibility of asylum claims.