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Welcome

This information sheet has been designed by the Home Office and sets out our plans for the former airfield in Wethersfield. This includes the intention to extend the temporary use of the site via a Special Development Order (SDO) for three years and where to find further information.

Background

The number of people arriving in the UK after crossing the Channel in small boats has put the asylum system under incredible pressure.

The Home Secretary has a legal duty to support individuals who claim asylum and would otherwise be destitute. This support can include accommodation which, for some time has included accommodating around 52,900 asylum seekers in hotels which is costing the UK taxpayer £8million a day.

The Government has been clear that using hotels to accommodate asylum seekers is unacceptable and unsustainable and is committed to reducing their use. Work is already underway to close hotels and use alternative accommodation, such as disused military sites.

The Wethersfield site in Essex opened in July and is successfully accommodating about 560 people with that number intended to steadily increase to 1,700 over time.

Why Wethersfield?

Wethersfield was identified as a surplus military site that is suitable to accommodate asylum seekers and can be brought back into beneficial use. The site at Wethersfield provides safe accommodation for asylum seekers and is designed to be as self-sufficient as possible.

Wethersfield

The former MOD site was announced for disposal when it became surplus to defence requirements.

The Home Office has taken over the running of the site and has developed proposals for its use for asylum accommodation.

The Home Office continue to work closely with stakeholders, including local authorities, our contractors and service providers, to ensure that accommodation delivers suitable, basic accommodation.



What Has Happened So Far?

The Wethersfield site began accommodating asylum seekers from 12th July 2023. We will continue to use a phased approach to gradually increase the number of asylum seekers accommodated at the site over time. The site can accommodate 1,700 individuals when fully operational.

Planning

The Home Office secured planning permission to use the site as asylum accommodation under Class Q emergency Crown development planning provisions. Under Class Q, the Home Office is permitted to use the site for non-detained asylum accommodation for a 12-month period until April 2024.

The Home Office intends to extend the temporary use of the site for a further three-year period and will seek planning permission by way of an SDO.

An SDO, a form of secondary legislation, grants planning permission for development specified in the order for a specific area of land.

Any decision to make the SDO will be made following independent assessment of the planning proposal and independent scrutiny by a Minister who is not the promoter of the development (i.e., not the Minister for Immigration or Home Secretary) and who will decide whether to grant planning permission on the evidence before them.

The Home Office remains committed to working with key stakeholders to facilitate their vision for the site. This will ensure that the Home Secretary can continue to fulfil his statutory obligations to accommodate the large number of asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute in a manner which reduces the use of inappropriate hotels.

What Will The Site Look Like Over The 3-Year Period?

If the Home Office obtains planning permission for a further three years, the Home Office will continue to ensure the site is fit for purpose with minimal impact on the local community.

This includes:

- using existing refurbished buildings and modular accommodation to support up to 1,700 asylum seekers on the site.
- maintaining onsite provision for asylum-seekers.
- working with local stakeholders to identify and mitigate key concerns.
- environmental improvements continue to be considered, including the Diamond Jubilee Wood.
- continued addressing of traffic concerns, implementing traffic mitigations where appropriate.

Site Operation

The Wethersfield site is currently accommodating about 560 individuals. The site is staffed 24/7 which will mean minimal traffic overnight as staff come on shift.

The site will continue to accommodate single adult male asylum seekers between the ages of 18 and 65.

Most asylum seekers accommodated at Wethersfield will be new arrivals to the UK following appropriate asylum screening processes, health checks and checks against police and immigration databases.

They will also have received a health check on arrival at the site.

The asylum seekers are accommodated in refurbished existing buildings on site and modular accommodation. There is currently about 50% occupancy in modular accommodation which is popular with asylum seekers.

The maximum length of stay for asylum seekers is nine months, except when the Home Secretary is unable to find suitable onward dispersal accommodation despite reasonable efforts to do so.

All necessary health and safety checks have been completed. Relevant health and safety policies apply to ensure the site continues to be fit for purpose.

Since 16th October 2023 conversational English classes have been running weekly on Mondays and Tuesdays with local community members. The activity has received positive feedback onsite from both those conducting the sessions and those attending, with 50 to 100 asylum seekers attending every session.

Impact on community and local services

The Wethersfield site has been designed to be as self-sufficient as possible in order to minimise the potential impact on local communities, services, and the need to leave the site. This includes providing accommodation with:

- on-site medical provision
- catering
- communal space
- faith and worship facilities
- large gymnasium to allow for recreational and sporting facilities to be used all year round.

The on-site primary healthcare is delivered by a local healthcare provider Monday to Friday. This is run by healthcare professionals; a doctor and nurses, who offer systematic health assessments and are able to prescribe medication.

To minimise the potential impact on the local services, and to ensure the orderly flow of people onto and off the site, a regular transport service is in place to take users to larger local towns. Transport will also be provided so asylum seekers can attend off site appointments.

Safety And Security

The safety and security of the local community, asylum seekers and staff are of paramount importance.

Asylum seekers allocated to the site will have undergone asylum screening assessments including checks against police and immigration databases. The Home Office will continue to apply an Allocation of Asylum Accommodation policy to ensure that those accommodated are suitable to be accommodated on the site.

On arriving, asylum seekers at the site will receive a briefing and orientation about the site and the local community, including traffic safety. In addition to information about how to access services on and off site, the briefing explains what constitutes appropriate behaviour. It sets out acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, as well as their responsibilities as individuals to act as good neighbours.

A specialist and experienced security provider is working on site 24/7.

We have worked with Essex Police around the security of the site. A police constable dedicated to the area has been appointed.

If any criminal activity does occur on site, our provider has robust processes in place to report them to the police.

Funding

The government currently provides £3,500 to local authorities for each new and occupied beds across the country. This £3,500 funding for local authorities has been extended to Braintree District Council for the site at Wethersfield.

The site has been designed to limit the impact on the local community. The Home Office is providing funding to the NHS to support an on-site primary health service to reduce the impact on local services. Asylum seekers will register at the onsite facility to reduce the impact on the local health services.

Further Information

The Home Office has been engaging with a range of national and local stakeholders regarding the proposals for the Wethersfield site.

We understand the community may have further questions regarding the Wethersfield site itself. We endeavour to keep you updated through the factsheets and newsletters however, if you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact us at:

Home Office

Direct Communications Unit

2 Marsham Street

London

SW1P 4DF

Email: public.enquiries@homeoffice.gov.uk

Telephone: 020 7035 4848

You can find additional information on the:

Wethersfield Factsheet

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-accommodation-factsheets/factsheet-mod-wethersfield-asylum-accommodation>

and

Wethersfield Community Newsletter

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-accommodation-factsheets/wethersfield-community-update-newsletter>.