

Bicester: Statement on National Importance

Proposed Use of Site A at Bicester: former Defence Storage and Distribution Centre/Ordnance Depot for Urgent Crown Development

Purpose of this Statement

This Statement is submitted by the Home Office to support proposals at the former Defence Storage and Distribution Centre/Ordnance: Bicester. It demonstrates that the development is (i) of national importance and (ii) required as a matter of urgency. It also explains the proposed planning route under the Urgent Crown Development procedure to secure long-term operation. The statement is intended to cover both requirements of article 6(1)(iv) of the Town and Country Planning (Crown Development) (Urgent Applications) (Procedure) (England) Order 2025.

Summary of the Proposals

The Home Office intends to use the site at Bicester to accommodate up to 1,256 asylum seekers through a phased delivery model. The site will provide a flexible and operationally resilient component of the national asylum accommodation estate, supporting the Home Office's ability to manage accommodation demand, occupancy pressures and movement through the estate.

The site will provide basic and functional accommodation via modular accommodation units. Asylum seekers at the site will not be detained; however, the site will be self-contained with essential services provided on site to reduce the impact on local services.

The site will operate as short-stay accommodation, with the on-site population consisting primarily of newly arrived, male asylum seekers. The operational model will support the managed movement of residents through the asylum estate, including the cessation of asylum support where an individual's asylum claim has been determined. Over time however, it is intended that the site will subsequently be expanded for use as a long-term asylum accommodation solution.

Site Context and Feasibility

The site forms part of a former Defence Storage and Distribution Centre east of Bicester, accessed from the B4011 and opposite HMP Bullingdon. Two villages lie within a 2-mile radius. Current plans for the site centre around a large area of existing hardstanding to deliver initial bedspaces via a modular accommodation solution, with options to extend this to areas of Nissen huts that could be demolished to utilise hardstanding foundations. Re-use of existing hard standing materially shortens programme delivery and reduces ecological impact.

Description of Development and Design Approach

The proposed development will deliver a secure, managed asylum accommodation facility, providing an initial minimum viable product (MVP) capacity followed by phased expansion to full long-term operational capacity. The delivery strategy prioritises the

establishment of the site through the installation of modular accommodation on existing hardstanding areas, alongside the demolition of buildings within the development area. This approach uses standardised, repeatable units and modern methods of construction to support fast deployment and phased growth, while minimising groundworks and reducing impacts in sensitive locations.

Planning Route

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (SSHD) has a power to provide asylum support to those who would otherwise be destitute, including accommodation and/or subsistence under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; temporary support under section 98 while a section 95 application is considered; and support under section 4(2) for certain refused asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute and who meet the statutory criteria.

The Bicester development will enable the SSHD to meet the powers set out under the IAA 1999 by increasing the size of the asylum accommodation estate and providing greater flexibility to meet additional surge capacity and respond safely to periods of increased arrivals.

The Home Office is seeking determination via the Urgent Crown Development procedure to secure timely planning permission for the works required to enable the site to go live.

National Context and Urgency: Need for Suitable Asylum Accommodation

From 2004 to 2020 there were between 22,000 and 46,000 people claiming asylum in the UK each year. However, since the second half of 2021 there has been a notable increase, peaking at 110,051 in the year ending September 2025. In the year ending September 2025, the UK received the fifth largest number of asylum seekers in the EU+, after Germany, France, Spain and Italy and the fifteenth largest intake when measured per head of population. The number of people claiming has fallen in the latest year but remains high compared to the previous two decades¹. As of 31 December 2025, 107,000 individuals were in receipt of asylum support, including 31,000 (29%) in hotels. While the initial decision backlog has reduced to 64,000 people (relating to 49,000 cases) 35% of people waiting for an initial decision had been waiting for over a year²; demonstrating that the absolute number requiring accommodation remains high³.

Additionally, irregular migration remains a live operational challenge with continued fluctuation in small boat activity, compounding the issue and leading to sustained pressure on the asylum system. In the year ending December 2025, there were 46,000 detected arrivals via illegal routes, of which 89% arrived by small boat: 13% higher than the previous year⁴. Over the same period, 101,000 people claimed asylum⁵, with small boat arrivals accounting for around two-fifths of all claims⁶. This demand for

¹ [How many people claim asylum in the UK? - GOV.UK](#)

² [How many people are in the UK asylum system? - GOV.UK](#)

³ Home Office Published statistics, Asylum seekers in receipt of support, ASY_D09. Available at: [Immigration system statistics data tables - GOV.UK](#).

⁴ [Summary of latest statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ [How many people claim asylum in the UK? - GOV.UK](#)

⁶ [Summary of latest statistics - GOV.UK](#)

accommodation fluctuates seasonally. [REDACTED]⁷, underscoring the requirement for capacity that can be stood up at pace and flexed safely to meet peaks.

The Home Office's main source of asylum accommodation is dispersal accommodation (DA). As of December 2025, there were 68,538 service users accommodated in DA⁸. [REDACTED]⁹. Although the Home Office is seeking to increase the size of the DA estate, specifically the number of HMO and single occupancy beds, it is faced with substantial commercial challenges in the private rental sector market.

In his Written Ministerial Statement made on 13 February 2025, the Minister of State for Housing and Planning set out when a development is considered to be of national importance. Namely, where the development would:

- involve the interests of national security or of foreign Governments;
- contribute towards the provision of national public services or infrastructure, such as new prisons, defence, or border infrastructure;
- support a response to international, national, or regional civil emergencies; or
- otherwise have significant economic, social, or environmental effects and strong public interest at a regional or national level¹⁰.

The Home Office considers that the proposed development at Bicester meets multiple requirements to be determined as a development of national importance in accordance with the guidelines set out above.

This development sits within the parameters of point 2 given that the provision of asylum accommodation to destitute asylum seekers is a public service arising from the statutory power placed upon the SSHD under the IAA 1999.

Additionally, as set out previously, the Home Office is dealing with unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers requiring support, including accommodation to avoid destitution. In response to point 3, where numbers significantly exceed available capacity, for example, during seasonal surges in asylum numbers, the resulting risk of widespread destitution and pressure on essential public services may engage serious impacts on human welfare and amount to a civil emergency. Finally, in so far as point 4 is engaged, the Home Office has sought to meet the shortfall in accommodation through hotels. However, this is largely out of necessity rather than choice. Hotels are not the most suitable accommodation for most cohorts of asylum seekers and their planning status as asylum accommodation has been a repeated source of dispute, leading to widespread legal challenges by Local Authorities on planning and wider public law grounds. Additionally, the prolonged use of hotels has placed a strain on local communities, becoming a flashpoint for community tensions, leading to an increase in protests and violence. It is also understood that hotels represent a 'pull' factor for asylum seekers to come to the UK even after passing through other safe countries: intelligence

⁷ Internal management information, Home Office monthly asylum accommodation inflow statistics, March 2026.

⁸ Home Office Published statistics, Asylum seekers in receipt of support, ASY_D09. Available at: [Immigration system statistics data tables - GOV.UK](#).

⁹ Internal management information, Home Office asylum accommodation statistics, March 2026

¹⁰ [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)

suggests that the prospect of a paid-for hotel bed is used to lure asylum seekers into small boats¹¹.

The management of the asylum accommodation estate is not a matter that can be addressed effectively at a purely local level. The SSHD's statutory obligations to support eligible destitute asylum seekers must be discharged through a single, nationally managed and operationally flexible estate capable of responding to uneven and rapidly changing patterns of arrivals, cohort mix, occupancy and available capacity across the United Kingdom. The pressures to which the estate responds are therefore borne across the system as a whole, not solely within the administrative area in which any individual site is located.

For that reason, decisions about the scale, distribution, resilience and surge capacity of the asylum estate must be taken by reference to national operational requirements and national policy objectives, rather than by reference only to the constraints or preferences of a single local plan area. The site is proposed because it contributes to that nationally coordinated response: it would provide a controllable and self-contained component of the wider asylum estate, including surge capacity, which can be brought into use to meet UK-wide pressures, reduce reliance on less suitable contingency accommodation across multiple local authority areas, and improve the resilience of the estate as a whole. That is why the proposal is properly characterised as development of national importance and why national determination is justified.

The use of the former MOD site at Bicester provides a more controlled and operationally resilient alternative that helps mitigate cohesion and public order risks. Unlike hotels located within, or immediately adjacent to, town centres and residential neighbourhoods, Bicester is on an established military estate, with defined boundaries and gated access from B4011, enabling robust security management and controlled movement in and out of the site. Additionally, Bicester is to provide coordinated service provision and management and will subsequently reduce cumulative impacts on multiple communities from using hotels. Furthermore, the layout and infrastructure are designed for communal use unlike hotels which are not intended for sustained residential accommodation.

It is considered that there is a genuine urgent need, in so far as that an expedited planning process is required to make the site operational as quickly as possible. As highlighted throughout this statement, the urgency arises from fluctuating asylum arrivals and the need to replace hotel and DA estate dependence with more appropriate, operationally resilient accommodation that reduces identified community cohesion and public order risks. In this context, Bicester provides a modular solution delivering up to 1,256 bedspaces

Alternatives Considered and Need for Urgent Determination: Why Urgent Crown (not non-urgent Crown or Class Q) is necessary for Bicester

In order to operationalise this site in light of the reasons set out in this statement, the Home Office needs to secure planning permission for the site as soon as possible in 2026. The Urgent Crown Development procedure is the most appropriate route because it provides a faster determination timetable for nationally important schemes where a

¹¹ Restoring Order and Control Statement, November 2025: [Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the government's asylum and returns policy \(accessible\)](#) - GOV.UK

quick decision is required, enabling the site to progress to delivery and “go live” within the required programme window.

The consequence of not securing a decision within the accelerated timeframe is not merely that delivery would be deferred or that hotels would remain in use for longer as a matter of policy preference. Rather, delay would prevent the Home Office from bringing the site into operation within the required 2026 delivery window, thereby reducing the Department’s ability to manage fluctuations in demand, maintain contingency headroom and move service users through the estate in a safe and orderly manner.

In practical terms, a delayed determination would prolong reliance on hotels and constrained dispersal accommodation that are less suitable operationally, defer the release and reconfiguration of capacity needed elsewhere in the asylum estate, and extend exposure to the operational, safeguarding, community cohesion and public order risks associated with the continued use of less suitable forms of accommodation. It would also compress procurement and mobilisation activity into a shorter period, materially increasing delivery risk and making timely provision of the proposed bedspaces materially less likely. These are the substantive operational consequences of not obtaining a decision within the accelerated Urgent Crown timetable.

Alternative routes are not considered suitable for the following reasons:

- The ‘non-urgent’ Crown Development route is understood to take approximately 12 weeks to determine applications and 16 weeks for EIA applications. Those timescales would delay determination to late autumn 2026, pushing delivery of initial bedspaces well into 2027 once allowance is made for mobilisation, procurement, and discharge of conditions.
- Planning permission is required by late summer to allow works to begin to maintain the programme critical path. Current programme assumptions are to submit the Urgent Crown application by July, secure Urgent Crown approval by late August 2026 to enable required works to be completed.
- Time must also be factored in for any pre-commencement conditions to be discharged (e.g., construction environmental controls and construction traffic/logistics controls). Those requirements cannot be fully programmed until the decision and conditions are known, so delay in determination directly translates into delay in start on site and delivery of MVP capacity.
- Urgent Crown is expressly designed to accelerate determination for nationally important development where urgency is evidenced. Bicester is being progressed on an accelerated timetable precisely to ensure the Home Office can stand up capacity at pace and reduce reliance on less suitable contingency accommodation.
- A ‘Special Development Order’ (SDO) is not an appropriate alternative because it is a separate bespoke ministerial/legislative route with inherent uncertainty and delay risk; following the introduction of the Crown / Urgent Crown regime, it is no longer the most direct mechanism to secure a planning decision to the required timetable (as reflected by previous Home Office experience where an SDO approach was withdrawn and replaced by an Urgent Crown submission).

Alternative planning routes have also been considered. Reliance on Class Q of Part 19 of Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 alone would not align with the need for Bicester to operate as a long term, sustainable component of the asylum accommodation estate, and it would not

provide the necessary certainty for permanent infrastructure solutions and operational safeguarding.

For these reasons, Urgent Crown Development is the most viable route for Bicester: it combines speed with a robust planning judgement capable of considering the environmental information and securing proportionate mitigation, while meeting the practical requirement to obtain planning permission by late summer so that works can proceed within the required programme window.

Conclusion

For the reasons set out above, the proposals at Bicester are nationally important and required as a matter of urgency. The Home Office therefore seeks expedited determination under the Urgent Crown Development procedure to authorise operation and the installation of modular accommodation to meet the 1,256-bed requirement.