Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

[redacted]
Director of Asylum Support and Accommodation Operations
Home Office

Sent by e-mail only to:
[redacted]

Please ask for: Crown Casework Team

Tel: 0303 44 48050
Email: crowncasework@communities.gov.uk

Your ref: N/A

Our ref: PCU/RARE/C3105/3378843

Date: 12 November 2026

Dear [redacted]

The Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – sections 293B-293C
The Town and Country Planning (Crown Development) (Urgent Applications) (Procedure) (England) Order 2025.

Application by the Secretary of State for the Home Department for the temporary change of use of the former defence storage and distribution centre site in connection with the phased provision of non-detained asylum accommodation for up to 1,256 Service Users at MOD Bicester Site A.

Planning application no: PCU/RARE/C3105/3378843

Date validated: 02 September 2026
Date published: 03 September 2026

This decision was made by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

1. The Secretary of State has considered the Officials' Report ('the OR') at **Annex A,** the application documents, and the consultation responses and representations received under section 293C(2) of the Town and Country

Planning Act 1990 (“the TCPA 1990”) and the Town and Country Planning (Crown Development) (Urgent Applications) (Procedure) (England) Order 2025 (“the 2025 Order”). The application and the relevant statutory procedure are described at **paragraphs 1.1–1.4** of the OR.

2. For the reasons set out below, the Secretary of State agrees with the conclusions and recommendation in the OR and has decided to **grant planning permission**, subject to the conditions at **Annex B,** pursuant to section 293C(4) of the TCPA 1990 and the 2025 Order.

3. All references to paragraph numbers, unless otherwise stated, are to the OR.

Procedural History

4. The application was accompanied by a Statement on National Importance and Urgency as required by article 6(1)(c)(iv) of the 2025 Order. The statement explained that the proposal is intended to provide a flexible and operationally resilient component of the nationally managed asylum accommodation estate, enabling the Home Office (“HO”) to respond to fluctuating demand, occupancy pressures and movement through the estate. It identified continuing pressure on accommodation capacity, including a shortage of single-occupancy provision, continued reliance on hotels and other contingency accommodation, and the need to maintain contingency headroom. On 13 July 2026, having considered the material before him, the Minister of State for Housing and Planning (“the Minister”) concluded that the development was of national importance and needed to be carried out urgently. He agreed that the application should proceed under the urgent Crown development procedure (**OR paragraphs 1.1–1.4**). That gateway conclusion is distinct from the assessment of the planning merits. Cherwell District Council was notified on 20 July 2026 **(OR paragraph 5.2)**.

5. Although permission is sought for a fixed term of ten years, the Secretary of State has assessed the proposal as if it was for a permanent development. She has not relied on the time-limited nature of the proposal to reduce the significance or weight of impacts arising during that period (**OR paragraph 2.1**).

6. The application was validated on 2 September 2026 and published on 3 September 2026. The consultation and public representation period ran from 7 to 17 September 2026 (**OR paragraph 5.2**).

7. On 28 October 2026, the HO requested consideration of a height for the proposed modular accommodation of up to 6.6 metres above finished ground level, rather than the 6 metres stated in their original application submission. On 5 November 2026, the HO provided further information about the likely height of the modular accommodation, being potentially 7 metres and rising to

8.5 metres above finished ground level. On 6 November 2026, the HO clarified that the proposed modular accommodation would not exceed 7 metres above finished ground level.

Sensitive Information

8. Some information submitted with the application was withheld from publication or redacted following a direction by the Secretary of State under section 293B(11) of the TCPA 1990 and article 12 of the 2025 Order. The direction was limited to information relating to matters of national security or measures taken or to be taken to ensure the security of any premises or property, where public disclosure would be contrary to the national interest. The Secretary of State has nevertheless considered the unredacted material in full and is satisfied that the redactions did not prevent the planning merits of the proposal, or the material considerations raised through consultation and representations, from being properly assessed.

Environmental Impact Assessment and Habitats Regulations

9. The Secretary of State has had regard to the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 and the Screening Direction issued on 26 August 2026. The Direction concluded that the proposal was not EIA development and that an Environmental Statement was not required. The Secretary of State has considered the HO's clarification of 6 November 2026 concerning modular accommodation buildings up to 7 metres above finished ground level. For the reasons set out at **OR paragraph 5.5**, she is satisfied that these clarifications do not materially alter the nature, scale or likely environmental effects considered in the Screening Direction and that the proposal remains not EIA development. The environmental effects of the proposal nevertheless remain material planning considerations.

10. The Secretary of State is the competent authority for the purposes of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. Officials undertook a Stage 1 screening assessment and, because certain mitigation proposed by the applicant could not lawfully be considered at the screening stage, also undertook a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment. For the reasons set out at **OR paragraphs 5.9 – 5.10**, the Secretary of State is satisfied that, subject to the identified mitigation being secured through planning conditions, the proposal would not adversely affect the integrity of any internationally protected habitat site, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects. The separate potential hydrological and water-quality pathway to Arncott Bridge Meadows SSSI is addressed at **OR paragraph 19.3 – 19.4**.

11. The Secretary of State has also had due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and to relevant human rights

considerations. The assessment is set out at **OR paragraphs 5.12–5.13 and 13.1–13.6**, and in **Annex D** to the OR. Subject to the recommended controls relating to operation, safeguarding, accessibility and community cohesion, any interference with private interests would be proportionate and justified in the public interest.

Consultation

12. The consultation responses and representations are summarised at **OR paragraphs 6.1–6.5 and 7.1** and reproduced or summarised in **Annexes E–J to the OR**. Natural England has no objection, subject to conditions. Its remaining concern relates to the long-term foul-drainage arrangements, which are addressed by the recommended foul-drainage condition (**OR paragraph 6.1**). The Environment Agency raised no objection, subject to conditions. National Highways raised no objection (**OR paragraph 6.1**). Oxfordshire County Council objected in its capacity as Local Highway Authority and maintained a holding objection in its capacity as Lead Local Flood Authority (**OR paragraph 6.1**). Cherwell District Council, several other councils and stakeholders, Members of Parliament and members of the public also objected (**OR paragraphs 6.2–6.5 and 7.1**). Approximately 3,177 objections and one representation in support were received (**OR paragraph 7.1**). The Secretary of State has had regard to these representations and any material considerations arising from them.

13. The Secretary of State notes that the proposal consulted on is different to that being determined but considers that the scale of the change to the maximum building height of the modular units would make little difference to the consultation responses received.

14. The Secretary of State is satisfied that the application can be determined based on the submitted material, consultation responses and representations considered in the OR. Where detailed matters remain to be resolved, the conditions define the parameters within which the development may proceed and require the necessary further assessment, approval and mitigation before the commencement or occupation of the relevant phase (**OR paragraphs 24.3 and 24.6**.

Consideration of the Development Plan

15. The relevant development plan comprises the Cherwell Local Plan (2011–2031) Part 1, re-adopted in 2016, the saved policies of the Cherwell Local Plan 1996 and the Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan 2017 (**OR paragraph 8.1**). Although not required to do so, the Secretary of State's decision and consideration of the main issues consider relevant policies in the development plan and other material considerations, including the National Planning Policy

Framework ("NPPF") and relevant Planning Practice Guidance (**OR paragraphs 8.1–8.8**).

Determination

Principle of development and need

16. The Secretary of State agrees that national demand for asylum accommodation remains high and that the proposal would provide up to 1,256 places, helping to address the shortage of suitable single-occupancy provision, support the discharge of statutory asylum-support functions, improve the resilience and contingency capacity of the nationally managed asylum accommodation estate and reduce reliance on hotels and other contingency accommodation (**OR paragraphs 9.2–9.7**). She gives **substantial positive weight** to the urgent national public-service need for the development (**OR paragraphs 9.6 and 23.3**). She also agrees that the principle of the proposed use is acceptable, subject to the site-specific assessment and safeguards identified in the OR (**OR paragraphs 9.1–9.12**).

Character and appearance

17. The Secretary of State agrees that the proposal would result in limited and mainly localised landscape and visual change, chiefly from the B4011, nearby rights of way and parts of Piddington. Those effects would be moderated, but not entirely removed, by the existing woodland, hedgerows and mature vegetation along the eastern, southern and western sides of the site, together with retained military development and intervening built form. The proposed modular accommodation buildings would be double stacked and no more than two storeys, with a maximum height of 7 metres above finished ground level. The 12-metre operational-development parameter, above existing site levels, is intended to accommodate roof-mounted plant, detailed construction requirements and the retained warehouse-type Building A6. It does not provide for new 12-metre-high accommodation buildings Subject to conditions limiting new modular accommodation buildings to two storeys and 7 metres above finished ground level, requiring approval of the associated ground, floor and roof levels, and separately controlling the height and location of plant and other operational development within the overall 12-metre parameter, together with the layout, materials, landscaping, boundary treatment, lighting and retention of vegetation, the Secretary of State agrees that the proposal would accord with the relevant landscape, design and green infrastructure policies and would cause no material residual landscape or visual harm (**OR paragraphs 2.5, 10.1–10.**).

Access and transport

18. The Secretary of State agrees that highway-capacity and Strategic Road Network impacts are acceptable and concludes that safe and suitable access can be achieved in principle, subject to conditions securing the final access design, visibility splays, swept paths, B4011 safety measures, any necessary highway works, operational controls and movement monitoring. She notes that the capacity modelling principally assessed the northern access. She has also taken account of the HO's confirmation that the southern access could serve as the principal operational access, with the northern access used for emergency or contingency purposes, and its preference that both accesses should remain available for operational use where each is demonstrated to be safe and suitable. The respective roles of the northern and southern accesses, including the allocation of staff, visitor, coach, minibus, managed Service User transport, service, refuse and emergency movements, would be defined and justified through the Highway Safety and Access Scheme required by condition. The scheme would demonstrate that each proposed access is safe and suitable for its allocated movements, individually and in combination, having regard to access geometry, measured visibility, vehicle tracking, traffic distribution, pedestrian and cycle safety, emergency access and any necessary highway works. The scheme would require approval before construction commences, with all works and controls necessary for each approved access use implemented before that use begins. Construction access and routing would be controlled separately through the Construction Traffic Management Plan, which must be consistent with the approved Highway Safety and Access Scheme. Subject to those controls, the Secretary of State considers that the approved access arrangements would be capable of operating safely and that local highway safety, access, highway capacity and Strategic Road Network impacts would attract neutral weight in the planning balance. However, the site's restricted sustainable-transport accessibility and constrained pedestrian and cycle environment would result in partial conflict with the relevant sustainable transport policies. The on-site facilities, managed Service User transport and Travel Plan would substantially moderate, but not remove, those shortcomings, subject to the routes, destinations, capacity, frequency and hours of operation being confirmed through the operational transport arrangements. Taking that mitigation into account, she gives the residual transport and accessibility harm limited adverse weight (**OR paragraphs 11.4, 11.14–11.15, 11.20 and 24.4**).

Public safety and emergency access

19. The Health and Safety Executive raised no objection (**OR paragraph 6.1**). The Secretary of State agrees that no fire-safety, or emergency-access matter has been identified that would preclude planning permission. Site-specific controls are nevertheless required to ensure that emergency vehicles can pass through the secure perimeter and access the development in accordance with the approved site layout and access arrangements. These matters would be

secured through the Fire Safety and Emergency Access Strategy, coordinated with the Highway Safety and Access Scheme and the Operational Management, Safeguarding and Community Cohesion Plan. Subject to those controls, she agrees that the proposal would accord with the relevant policies in respect of emergency access. Fire safety is otherwise addressed through the relevant regulatory regimes (**OR paragraphs 12.1–12.3**).

Safeguarding, community cohesion and residential amenity

20. The Secretary of State has taken account of Thames Valley Police's response, in which it does not object, and its advice concerning detailed designing-out-crime measures, the visibility and privacy of occupants, potential protest activity, community perceptions of safety and security and potential additional policing demands (**OR paragraphs 6.3 and 13.1–13.7**). She agrees that the site's controlled boundaries, on-site facilities, security staffing, safeguarding arrangements and liaison with relevant health, police, local-authority and community partners would materially reduce potential safeguarding, community-cohesion and public-safety effects. Subject to the approval and implementation of an Operational Management, Safeguarding and Community Cohesion Plan before the occupation of each relevant phase, together with the associated security, police and stakeholder liaison, monitoring and review arrangements, she agrees that the material planning effects can be adequately mitigated. Nevertheless, having regard to the scale of the development, potential additional demands on policing and local services, and dependency on future operational arrangements, she gives the residual community-cohesion impacts **limited adverse weight** (**OR paragraphs 13.6-13.7 and 23.4**). She also considers that effects on residential amenity arising from construction, noise, air quality and lighting would be adequately addressed by the identified controls (OR paragraphs 10.4–10.6 and 17.1–18.5, together with the External Lighting condition in Annex K to the OR).

Flood risk and drainage

21. The Secretary of State agrees that the site lies predominantly within Flood Zone 1 and that the practical risk of fluvial flooding is very low, subject to verification of watercourse connectivity. Surface-water flooding is the principal flood risk. She agrees that the available evidence establishes that acceptable surface-water and foul-drainage solutions are achievable in principle. The recommended conditions require the detailed design, capacity, outfall arrangements and necessary mitigation to be approved, implemented and verified before relevant development or occupation of each phase. Subject to those conditions, she is satisfied that the proposal would be safe from flooding for its lifetime, avoid increasing flood risk elsewhere, incorporate appropriate sustainable drainage, and protect water resources and water quality. She

agrees that the proposal would accord with the relevant policies (OR paragraphs 14.1–14.6 and 23.3).

Land contamination and ground conditions

22. The Secretary of State agrees that ground conditions, contamination, asbestos and unexploded ordnance are known constraints but do not preclude the development. Subject to appropriate investigation, remediation, verification, asbestos management and unexploded ordnance controls, the site can be made suitable for the proposed use. (**OR paragraphs 15.1–15.5 and 23.3**).

Trees

23. The Secretary of State agrees that the proposal would retain the principal areas of boundary vegetation and that conditions would secure an Arboricultural Impact Assessment, an Arboricultural Method Statement, tree-protection measures, replacement planting and appropriate landscape and ecological management. She nevertheless acknowledges that the detailed development is anticipated to result in the loss of some lower-quality trees and vegetation. Subject to tree protection and any necessary replacement planting being secured by condition, she agrees that tree loss would not be significant and that the proposal would accord with the relevant policies concerning trees, biodiversity, landscape character and green infrastructure. (**OR paragraphs 16.1–16.3 and 23.3**).

Air quality

24. The Secretary of State agrees that construction dust and particulate emissions can be controlled through a Construction Environmental Management Plan and that operational traffic emissions would not be significant. Subject to conditions securing construction-phase mitigation through that Plan, together with implementation of the Travel Plan and operational traffic-management measures, she agrees that the proposal would accord with the relevant policies insofar as they relate to air-quality effects on human and ecological receptors (**OR paragraphs 17.1–17.5 and 23.3**).

Noise and lighting

25. The Secretary of State agrees that construction noise can be controlled through a Construction Environmental Management Plan and that operational noise effects can be addressed through detailed design and controls on plant and any wastewater-treatment infrastructure (**OR paragraphs 18.1–18.4**). Subject to those controls, she agrees that the development would not cause unacceptable noise effects or a material loss of tranquillity (**OR paragraph**

18.2-18.4). External lighting would be controlled to protect residential amenity, landscape character and ecological receptors (OR paragraphs 10.4 and 19.6).

Ecology and biodiversity

26. The Secretary of State agrees that, subject to the mitigation secured through planning conditions, the proposal would not adversely affect the integrity of any internationally protected habitat site, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects (**OR paragraph 19.2**). She agrees that the remaining concern regarding long-term foul drainage would be addressed by the recommended foul-drainage condition, which would prevent occupation of each phase until an acceptable foul-drainage scheme had been submitted, approved and implemented. Subject to that condition, she is satisfied that the proposal would not result in an unacceptable effect on Arncott Bridge Meadows SSSI and would accord with the relevant policies in this respect (**OR paragraph 19.3**). Subject also to the pre-commencement protected-species condition, completion and approval of the required surveys and impact assessment, and implementation of all necessary avoidance, mitigation, compensation and licensing measures before relevant works commence, she agrees that the proposal would accord with the relevant policies concerning protected species and habitats (**OR paragraphs 19.4–19.5**).

Heritage and archaeology

27. The Secretary of State agrees that the proposal would preserve the setting and significance of nearby listed buildings (**OR paragraphs 20.1–20.3**). She also agrees that surviving elements of the Bicester Military Railway are non-designated heritage assets of local historic and evidential value. The submitted demolition plan does not identify those remains for removal and the proposal would not harm their significance. A condition requiring a Written Scheme of Investigation would nevertheless secure appropriate investigation, archaeological monitoring, recording and, where necessary, targeted excavation or strip-map-and-record. Heritage and archaeological matters therefore do not weigh for or against the proposal (**OR paragraphs 20.4–20.5 and 23.4**).

Effective use of previously developed land

28. The Secretary of State agrees that the proposal would make effective use of a substantially underused former military storage and distribution site, with development focused principally on existing hardstanding, retained buildings and other previously developed areas. For the reasons set out in **OR paragraphs 21.1–21.2**, the Secretary of State agrees that the proposal would accord with Policy L2 of the NPPF, which supports the effective use of

previously developed land and buildings, including through making better use of vacant and underutilised land and buildings, and through appropriate temporary uses. For the reasons in **OR paragraph 21.3**, the Secretary of State agrees that the general principle of Cherwell Local Plan Policy BSC2 is met, insofar as the proposal provides managed residential accommodation and reuses previously developed land, although it does not constitute Class C3 housing. This conclusion does not remove the site's accessibility shortcomings, which are assessed separately at paragraph 16 of this letter. She takes land reuse into account in assessing the benefits of the proposal, without assigning separate additional weight to compliance with effective-use-of-land policy, consistently with paragraph 29 of this letter.

Local facilities and services

29. The Secretary of State agrees that the proposed on-site healthcare and welfare facilities, staffing, referral arrangements, managed transport and substantially self-contained operating model would materially reduce pressure on local healthcare, emergency and other public services. Before occupation of each relevant phase, those facilities and arrangements, together with any additional mitigation demonstrated to be necessary to address residual effects on local primary-care capacity, must be secured. The approved facilities and arrangements must be maintained while the relevant phase is occupied. Subject to those controls, she agrees that unacceptable pressure on local services would be avoided and that the proposal would accord with the relevant policies. Some residual demand on healthcare, emergency and other public services would nevertheless remain, to which she gives limited adverse weight (**OR paragraphs 22.1–22.5 and 23.4**).

Planning conditions

30. The Secretary of State has had regard to the recommended conditions at Annex K to the OR, the role of those conditions in the assessment and planning balance at OR paragraphs 24.3–24.6, and the national policy tests for planning conditions. She is satisfied that the conditions are necessary, relevant to planning and to the development permitted, enforceable, precise and reasonable in all other respects. The conditions define the parameters of the development and secure the assessments, mitigation, infrastructure and operational controls required before commencement or occupation of the relevant phase. Those conditions would materially reduce, but would not remove, the residual adverse effects identified in the planning balance.

Planning Balance and Overall Conclusions

31. The Secretary of State agrees with the planning balance at **OR paragraphs 23.1–23.5**. She gives **substantial positive weight** to the benefit of meeting the urgent national public-service need for additional asylum accommodation, including addressing the shortage of suitable accommodation and operational headroom, supporting statutory asylum-support functions, and improving estate resilience and contingency capacity. That benefit would be delivered through the effective use of previously developed land; she does not assign separate additional weight to land reuse (**OR paragraph 23.3**). Subject to the recommended conditions, adverse effects can be avoided except for residual transport and accessibility harm, residual community-cohesion impacts, and residual impacts on local facilities and services, to which she gives limited adverse weight (**OR paragraph 23.4**). She has assessed the proposal against an extant but limited storage and military-related use, rather than a wholly vacant or abandoned site (**OR paragraph 9.12**). She agrees that the proposal would be in partial conflict with Cherwell Local Plan Policy SLE 4 but would accord with the development plan taken as a whole (**OR paragraph 23.1**). She agrees that the proposal constitutes the redevelopment of previously developed land outside a settlement and falls within Policy S5(1)(d), and that it does not fail to comply with any national decision-making policy which states that development proposals should be refused in specific circumstances under Policy S5(2).

32. The Secretary of State agrees, therefore, with the OR's conclusion that the proposal would accord with the development plan taken as a whole and that its benefits would not be substantially outweighed by the identified residual adverse effects. She agrees the recommendation that planning permission should be granted subject to the conditions at **Annex B** to this letter (**OR paragraphs 23.2–23.5; paragraph 23.5 and section 24**).

Formal Decision

33. Under sections 293B–293C of the TCPA 1990 and the 2025 Order, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has considered the application made by the Secretary of State for the Home Department for the development described below.

'The temporary change of use of the former defence storage and distribution centre site in connection with the phased provision of non-detained asylum accommodation. The Proposal comprises the retention and change of use of Building A6, demolition of existing buildings and structures and vegetation clearance, the erection of new modular accommodation, and the provision of space for associated health and welfare facilities, site infrastructure, wastewater infrastructure, roads, access ways, security infrastructure, parking, staff accommodation and

facilities, and open space and recreational areas, to accommodate up to 1,256 Service Users.'

34. Planning permission is granted for the development described above, subject to the conditions set out in **Annex B** to this decision letter. The Secretary of State is satisfied that those conditions are necessary, relevant to planning and to the development permitted, enforceable, precise and reasonable in all other respects. They reflect the conditions recommended at **Annex K to the OR**.

Right to Challenge This Decision

35. Any person aggrieved by this decision may challenge it by applying to the High Court under section 288 of the TCPA 1990. Any application must be made within six weeks beginning with the day after the date of this decision. A challenge may be brought only on the ground that the decision is legally flawed; it is not an opportunity to reconsider the planning merits. If the Court upholds the challenge, it may quash the decision, in which case the application would fall to be redetermined.

Yours sincerely

Crown Casework Team
This decision was made by the Secretary of State and signed on her behalf.

List of Annexes

Annex A – Officials' Report
Annex B – Planning Conditions