A Proposal for Self-Contained Island Asylum Reception & Processing Centres

A national alternative-sites proposal, with Gruinard Island as the primary feasibility case study and MOD Bicester Site A as the comparison point.

Core proposition

Before committing to further large asylum accommodation sites beside established communities, Government should test whether purpose-built, self-contained island reception and processing infrastructure can reduce community impacts, concentrate casework and essential services, and provide better long-term value.

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Status: Policy proposal for feasibility assessment - not a finding that any named island is presently suitable.

Important framing: The model proposed here is non-detained accommodation. Residents would remain legally free to leave and arrange their own lawful travel. Essential transport would remain available where required by law, medicine or operational necessity. The proposal is intended to minimise avoidable infrastructure and community impacts, not to presume that asylum applicants as a group present a public-safety threat.

1. Executive summary

The Home Office has applied for a 10-year temporary change of use of MOD Bicester Site A for non-detained asylum accommodation for up to 1,256 service users. The application includes new modular accommodation, health and welfare space, staff facilities, security infrastructure, roads, parking, recreation and provision for a wastewater treatment plant.

> **That scale is effectively small-settlement infrastructure. The policy question is therefore broader than whether Bicester can technically accommodate the proposal: if Government expects large-site asylum accommodation to remain a long-term national requirement, should it create purpose-selected national infrastructure rather than repeatedly adapting sites beside existing communities?**

This paper proposes an independent alternative-sites assessment focused on remote islands and island groups. Gruinard Island should be the headline feasibility case because it has no permanent population, substantial land area, close proximity to mainland Scotland, and was formally declared safe after Government decontamination. It should be assessed alongside Stroma, Flotta and suitable parts of Hoy.

No island should be selected on rhetoric alone. The Government should publish engineering, environmental, legal and whole-life cost comparisons before deciding whether an island model is viable.

Recommended decision

Commission a joint Home Office / MHCLG / relevant Scottish authorities feasibility programme comparing at least one purpose-built island centre with MOD Bicester and other large mainland sites over 10-, 20- and 30-year horizons.

2. Proposed operating model

The centre would be designed around processing first, accommodation second. Its purpose would be to concentrate the services required to establish identity, progress asylum claims, provide lawful support and resolve cases as efficiently as possible.

Component	Proposed approach
Accommodation	Basic, durable shared or individual accommodation as legally appropriate; central catering and sanitation.
Casework	On-site Home Office caseworkers, interview rooms, identity/biometric facilities where lawful, interpreters and administrative support.
Legal access	Private video-consultation rooms and in-person facilities where necessary; external travel only where remote participation is not sufficient or lawful.
Healthcare	On-site primary healthcare and remote consultation capability, with emergency/specialist transfer where clinically required.
Utilities	Independent or resilient power, potable water, wastewater treatment, waste handling and telecommunications.
Staffing	Dedicated staff transport and/or staff accommodation, with appropriate emergency-service arrangements.

Component	Proposed approach
Movement	Non-detained. Residents remain free to move around the island and arrange their own lawful off-island travel. No assumption of routine Government-funded discretionary transport.

The policy objective

The objective is to minimise avoidable impacts on established communities while identity, security and immigration status are being determined, while maintaining a lawful non-detained model. This is a risk-management and infrastructure argument, not a claim that asylum seekers collectively constitute a danger.

3. Primary feasibility case: Gruinard Island

Gruinard is the most striking test case because it combines zero permanent population with proximity to the mainland. Its history as a biological-weapons trial site is relevant but should be treated accurately: the Ministry of Defence states that following decontamination the island was declared safe by an independent advisory group before public confirmation in 1990, and it was subsequently sold back to the original owner's estate.

Why it merits formal assessment

Community separation. There is no permanent resident community on the island to absorb the direct day-to-day effects of a 1,000+ person reception facility.

Land. Gruinard is large enough in principle to allow a campus footprint, buffers, utilities and undeveloped areas. This paper does not assume all land is developable.

Mainland proximity. Its short sea separation creates the possibility of a mainland logistics/staff base supporting a purpose-built island campus, rather than requiring a long ocean supply chain.

Clean-sheet design. A purpose-built site could place accommodation, processing, healthcare, utilities and staff facilities around one operating model rather than retrofitting an unrelated estate.

What could rule Gruinard out

Gruinard has little of the infrastructure needed for 1,256 people. A credible feasibility study must therefore cost and test a landing facility, power, potable water, wastewater treatment, roads, waste handling, communications, staff logistics, emergency access and environmental constraints. Given the island's history, modern intrusive ground/environmental assessment should precede any construction decision.

Gruinard should therefore be treated as a test of the island model, not as a predetermined destination.

4. Other candidate islands

Candidate	Why examine it	Principal constraint	Initial role
Gruinard	No permanent population; close to mainland; ample land in principle	Very limited infrastructure; environmental/ground investigation; ownership	Primary clean-sheet feasibility case
Flotta	Daily ferry access; major industrial/maritime infrastructure; history of supporting thousands of service personnel	Existing community; active COMAH oil terminal and safeguarding constraints	Infrastructure-rich comparator
Hoy	Established Orkney ferry network; Lyness/Scapa Flow military history and transport links	Existing communities; land ownership and utility capacity require study	Large-island comparator
Stroma	Scottish Government classifies it as previously inhabited: no inhabitants, amenities or ferry service	Infrastructure almost entirely absent; marine access and utilities	Remote zero-population comparator

The Scottish Government's 2024 Islands Typology identifies 71 previously inhabited islands. That category means no current inhabitants, no on-island public amenities and no ferry services. The existence of that pool does not make 71 sites viable; it demonstrates that Government can conduct a systematic screening exercise rather than debating islands anecdotally.

5. Why compare this with MOD Bicester?

The current MOD Bicester application demonstrates why a national comparison is justified. The Home Office is seeking permission for up to 1,256 service users and substantial new infrastructure. The application is validated but not approved; the representation period is still to be confirmed.

The alternative-sites question should be asked before large sums are committed:

• What is the capital cost of making Bicester operational?

• What is the annual operating cost per occupied bed?

• What costs fall on policing, healthcare, transport, utilities and local government outside the core accommodation contract?

• What is the cost of decommissioning after a nominal 10-year permission?

• Would purpose-built national infrastructure have a higher upfront cost but a lower 20- or 30-year cost per resident?

• What residual public asset would remain after each model reaches the end of its planned life?

Required whole-life comparison

Cost / impact category	Bicester	Island model
Land / acquisition	Government estate / site-specific	Purchase, lease or public-estate option
Accommodation & processing	Retrofit + modular build	Purpose-built modular campus
Water / power / wastewater	Site upgrades; solution must be demonstrated	Potentially major new independent infrastructure
Transport / logistics	Road-based staff, service and resident movements	Marine logistics + staff transport/accommodation
External community demand	Potential interaction with surrounding services	Designed to minimise routine external demand
End-of-life value	Depends on restoration/reuse	Potential reusable national reception infrastructure

6. Tests any island proposal must pass

A serious proposal must be capable of being rejected if the evidence is poor. Each candidate should therefore pass all of the following gates:

Legal: The operating model must remain genuinely non-detained unless Parliament provides a lawful detention basis; access to legal process, healthcare and statutory support must remain effective.

Engineering: Demonstrable water, power, wastewater, waste, communications, marine access, fire and emergency capability.

Environmental: Habitats, protected species, landscape, marine ecology, contamination and climate/flood resilience.

Operational: Reliable staffing, food and supplies, casework, healthcare, security, emergency evacuation and severe-weather resilience.

Economic: Transparent capital and operating costs, including mainland logistics and staff premiums, compared on a whole-life basis.

Community: Effects on any existing island or mainland gateway community must be assessed rather than simply displaced.

7. Specific requests to Government

1. Commission an independent Island Reception & Processing Centre feasibility study before committing to additional large mainland sites.

2. Include Gruinard as the principal zero-population, near-mainland case study.

3. Include Flotta, Hoy and Stroma as contrasting infrastructure and remoteness comparators.

4. Screen the wider Scottish Government list of 71 previously inhabited islands against minimum land, environmental and marine-access criteria.

5. Publish a 10-, 20- and 30-year whole-life cost comparison with MOD Bicester and at least one other large mainland accommodation site.

6. Model a non-detained operating system in which core Home Office processing, primary healthcare and remote legal access are delivered on site.

7. Distinguish essential statutory/medical transport from routine discretionary transport when costing the model.

8. Publish reasons for rejecting any shortlisted island, so the public can see whether the obstacle is legal, engineering, environmental, operational or financial.

8. Conclusion

The proposal is not that Government should simply transfer the MOD Bicester plan to an undeveloped island. The proposal is that large-scale asylum reception should be treated as national infrastructure and subject to a transparent alternatives assessment.

Gruinard is the strongest headline test because it asks a clear question: if a site has no permanent resident population, is close to the mainland and has enough land in principle, can the additional infrastructure cost be justified by reduced community interaction and a purpose-built long-term operating model?

If the answer is no, Government should publish the evidence. If another island performs better, it should be identified. If every island is materially more expensive or operationally unsuitable, that too would be useful evidence when assessing mainland proposals such as MOD Bicester.

The essential request is therefore simple:

> **Do the comparison before committing the money.**

Sources and verification notes

The following public sources underpin the factual statements in this paper. Candidate suitability ratings are preliminary policy-screening judgments, not engineering or planning conclusions.

UK Government - Urgent Crown Development application: MOD Bicester (Site A), published 2 September 2026
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/urgent-crown-development-application-mod-bicester-site-a

Cherwell District Council - Urgent Crown application 26/01833/CROWN / MHCLG PCU/RARE/C3105/3378843
https://www.cherwell.gov.uk/info/9/planning-and-building/1411/important-information-re-urgent-crown-application

Scottish Government - Scottish Islands Typology: overview 2024
https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-islands-typology-overview-2024/

Scottish Government - Appendix 1: 71 Previously Inhabited Islands
https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-islands-typology-overview-2024/pages/9/

UK Parliament - MOD answer on Gruinard decontamination and 1990 safe declaration, 12 April 2022
https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-03-29/HL7433/

Orkney Islands Council - Marine Services
https://www.orkney.gov.uk/our-services/marine-services/

Orkney.com - Flotta: wartime heritage, oil terminal and daily ferry access
https://www.orkney.com/explore/flotta

Orkney Islands Council - Flotta Oil Terminal emergency planning / COMAH context
https://www.orkney.gov.uk/your-council/emergency-planning/flotta-oil-terminal/

Policy caveat: This paper recommends feasibility assessment. It does not establish land ownership availability, planning consent, environmental acceptability, utility capacity, marine engineering feasibility or final cost for any named island. Those matters require professional assessment.