MOD Bicester site A – objection

As County Councillor for the area, I would like to object to the proposal. I am responding in my capacity as a representative of local residents in neighbouring villages, including Arncott, Blackthorn, and Piddington, as well as further afield in Otmoor. I am, however, conscious that should this development go ahead, the asylum seekers resident on the site will be resident in my division – and I am therefore responding as their potential future representative.

Overall, despite its gargantuan length, the proposal appears to have given almost no thought to the realities of the site, the surrounding area, the impact on local communities or the wellbeing of asylum seekers accommodated on the site. It does not consider how they will travel to and from the site given the lack of pavements and poor lighting for much of the year. It does not consider the need for welfare activities, meaningful participation, mental health support and hope for the future. It does not consider that concentrating a large group of young single men with poor mental health in an isolated location and then failing to support them could not be better designed to generate crime. It does not consider the fear many in the area will fear for their safety – even those who also feel compassion for the asylum seekers themselves. And it does not consider the environmental risks associated with the site.

This site was never intended to house people – it was designed as a storage unit. Repurposing it will be expensive, inhumane, and detrimental to surrounding communities.

This lack of consideration has been exacerbated by the poor consultation process, with only a short window given for comments despite the lengthy application, the failure to engage in person with residents to understand their concerns, and the lack of communication with local elected representatives. This has created the impression that the consultation is only a formality. I hope the response to the many well-grounded objections that have been laid out proves this fear wrong.

My objection can be further broken down in the following grounds:

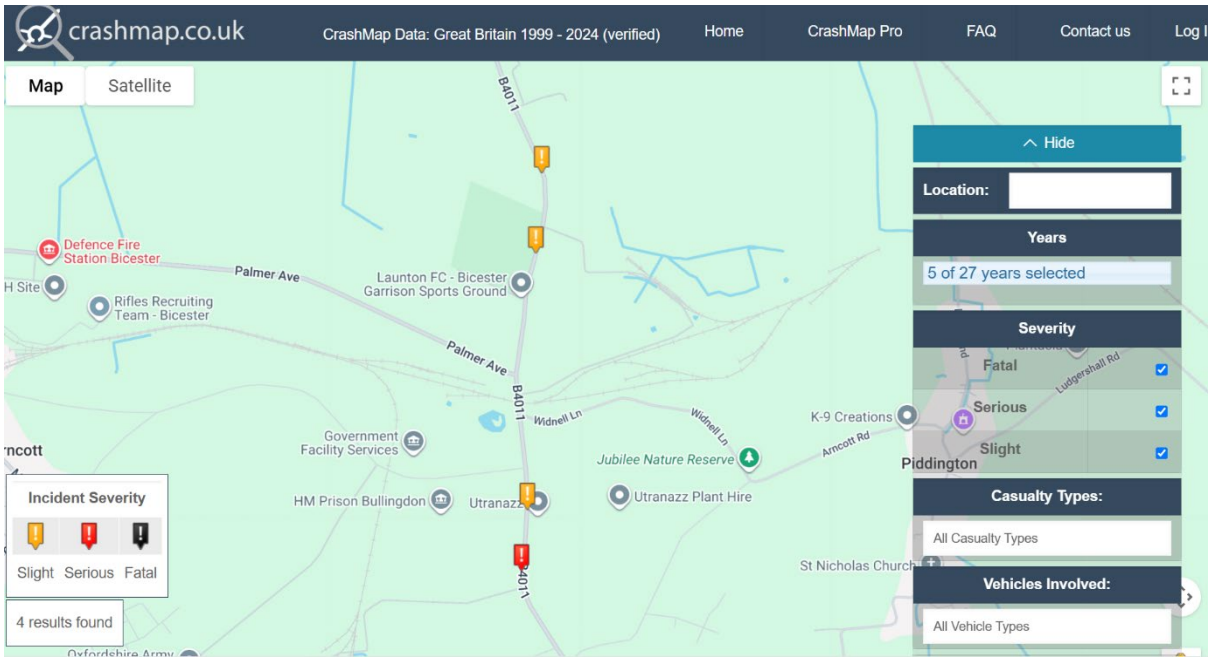
Transport:

Oxfordshire County Council is the highways authority for the area and therefore has an obligation to ensure the safety of local residents as well as asylum seekers and staff occupying the site should the application be approved.

The site is clearly unsuitable for the planned purpose. It was designed as a storage facility and was never intended to house large numbers of people. Accordingly it does not have in place any of the infrastructure needed for people to access the site in any significant number or using any modality other than motor vehicles.

Specifically, the site opens onto a fast road, with no pavement. While the proposal states that transport will be provided on and off site, it is inevitable that some people will at times miss the bus or choose to walk. With no safe alternative, this will result in them walking down the highway, a clear risk to their own safety and that of any drivers. In winter months, this will be exacerbated by poor lighting.

The road (the B4011) is already busy and fast moving with a history of accidents, including a fatal collision further up the road towards Blackthorn



The proposal does not include any mitigation for these serious safety concerns.

Environment:

The previous use of the site was as an MoD storage facility. Many residents in the area previously worked on the site in a civilian capacity and report serious environmental risks including potential contamination with asbestos and heavy metals. If present, this would pose a clear risk to asylum seekers housed on the site as well as those clearing and preparing accommodations, and staff working on the site.

Additionally no testing has been carried out for ‘forever chemicals’. These are known to be highly carcinogenic and have been found in significant concentrations at some former MoD sites, notably Heyford Park and Islip Fuel Depot. Given this risk, testing should be carried out before the site is developed.

Health

The application states that primary healthcare will be available on site, however no health impact assessment has been submitted. This is unconscionable in a development of this size and nature.

The healthcare concerns must be considered in two aspects: the healthcare of current local residents, and that of asylum seekers who will be housed at the site.

Local residents: while the availability of primary healthcare on site should mitigate the impact on local residents, it will not eliminate it. GP appointments are scarce in part because of challenges recruiting GPs. This development could put additional pressure on recruitment. Additionally, while primary healthcare may be provided on

site, it is not clear that this is also the case for specialist mental health care. Many asylum seekers have endured significant trauma prior to arriving in the UK, and this combined with their isolation at the proposed site and the indeterminate nature of their time there, could put significant strain on local mental health services, to the detriment of local residents. Additionally, they will need to use surrounding secondary health facilities, also under strain.

Asylum seekers: many asylum seekers arrive in the UK having endured significant trauma which will have prolonged impacts on their mental health. This proposal would relocate them isolated sites where they will live in close quarters with strangers – who may not even speak the same language and may also be suffering from trauma – for an indeterminate period while their claims are processed. This could not be better designed to exacerbate mental health challenges, making it vital that high quality mental health services be in place. Yet the proposal is silent on how these will be met. Specifically it does not explain:

- What mental health services would be available onsite.
- What specialist psychological or trauma-informed support would be provided.
- How individuals with complex mental health needs would be identified and supported.
- How residents would access NHS mental health services when required.
- What interpreting and advocacy support would be available during treatment.

This is vital both for asylum seekers' health and, given the associations between poor mental health and criminal activity, public safety.

Crime and Safety

Asylum seekers are not criminals, and there is no reason to suppose that asylum seekers are more or less likely to commit crimes than anyone else.

However, there are a number of factors that increase the risk of criminality associated with the site.

Firstly, asylum seekers receive very low cash allowances, but may wish to access cash to, for example, contact their families. There are reports from residents of organised crime present in the area, particularly engaged in flying drones into HMP Bullingdon as well as rural crime. Asylum seekers in need of funds may be vulnerable to exploitation by these groups.

Secondly, poor mental health is a risk factor for crime. Many asylum seekers have pre-existing mental health challenges and placing them in a situation all but guaranteed to exacerbate those challenges with no clear plans to support them, significantly increases the likelihood that some of those people will go on to commit crimes against local residents. It is deeply, deeply irresponsible for the government to be considering creating this situation – putting local residents and other asylum seekers alike at risk without any clear plans to protect them.

Finally, there is a risk of far right activity associated with the site (and potentially counter-protests). Arrest records of far right activists suggest that many have prior convictions for violent offences, particularly against women and girls. Their presence

in the area poses a risk to public safety, but no resources are to be provided to local police to manage this risk. This further increases risk to the public.

Community Cohesion

The proposal is already having devastating impact on community cohesion. Residents are fearful of the impact the site will have, while other residents fear the far right.

No information is provided on:

- How residents will interact with local communities.
- Opportunities for participation and social connection.
- Access to meaningful activities and support networks.

Efforts to enable those asylum seekers that want to to engage meaningfully with local communities – as opposed to just hanging around – could go some distance towards mitigating the inevitable community tensions. Similarly, the provision of meaningful activities on site would reduce the numbers travelling to neighbouring communities, as well as mitigating mental health concerns.